Gardner Dozois: Counterfactual

Fantasy & Science Fiction

UNE

Hallucigenia
Laird Barron

Albert E. Cowdrey

C. S. Friedman

John Morressy

DISPLAY UNTIL MAY 28

$3.99US $5.99CAN

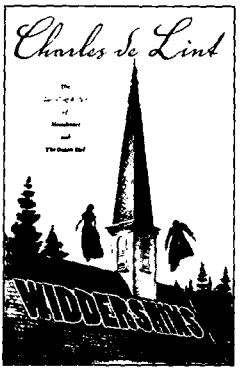
06>

0 74470 58370 7

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New Fantasy from Tor

Be Enchanted



Charles de Lint
Widdershins

0-765-31285-9 • $27.95/$37.95 Can.
In hardcover May 2006

Jilly Coppercorn and Geordie Riddell—characters from de Lint's first Newford story, "Timeskip"—will discover what everyone else already knows: they belong together.

"There is no better writer now than Charles de Lint at bringing out the magic in contemporary life."

—Orson Scott Card

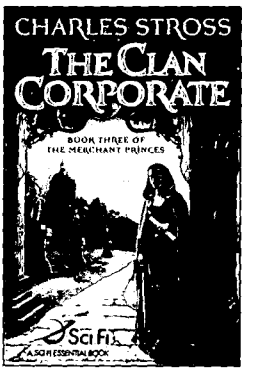
R. Garcia y Robertson
Firebird

0-765-31356-1 • $24.95/$33.95 Can.
In hardcover May 2006

Aria and her lover Sir Roye de Roye set out on a dangerous quest to save the land by restoring a rare and precious firebird's egg to its nest.

"Anyone who remembers childhood hero tales of dragonslayers and explorers finding wonders in fantastic unknown lands with nostalgia will love *Firebird*: here's a NEW hero tale."

—Ed Greenwood



Charles Stross
The Clan Corporate

0-765-30930-0 • $24.95/$33.95 Can.
In hardcover May 2006

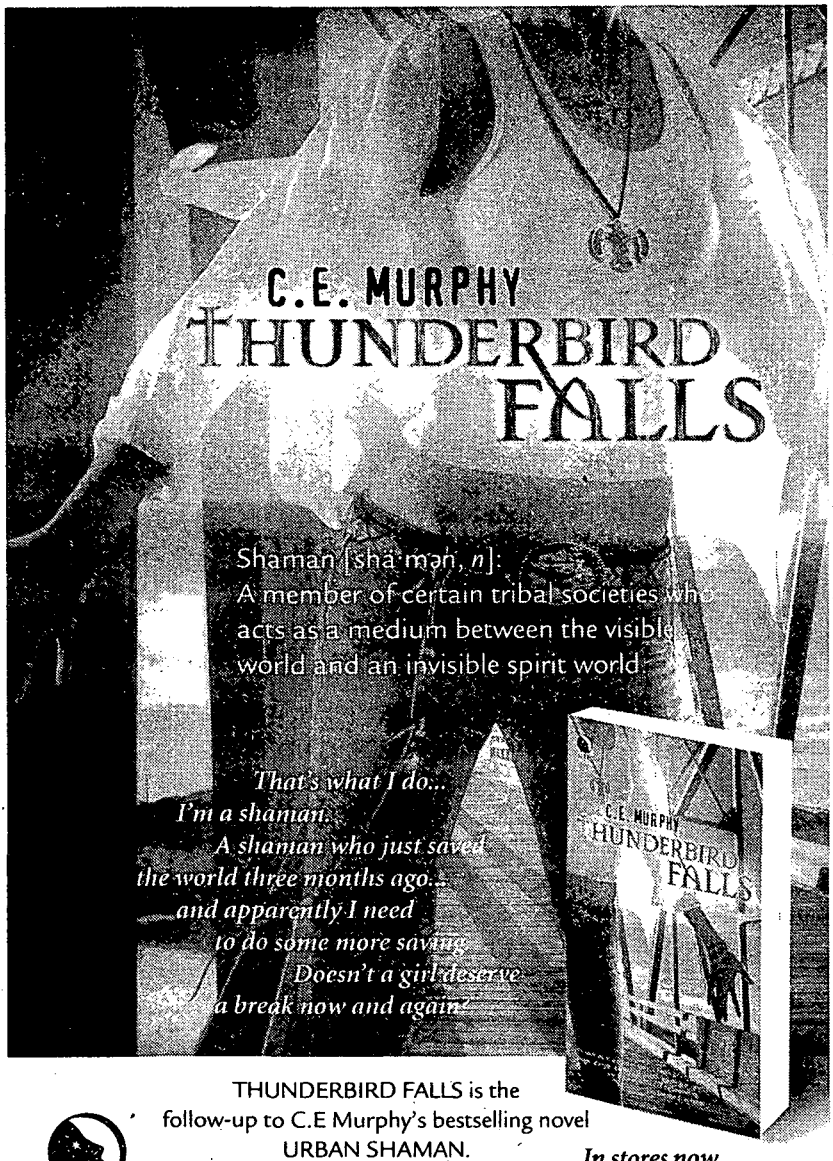
The third book in the Merchant Princes series. Miriam may be forced by her family to marry the brain-damaged son of a king in order to maintain power.

"With *The Family Trade*, Stross brings to fantasy the same kind of sly humor and clear-eyed extrapolation that he previously brought to space opera and horror."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

TOR
www.tor.com

LICENSED TO LINZ.DCC
FILE TOOMS. REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


C.E. MURPHY
THUNDERBIRD FALLS
Shaman [sha·man, n]:
A member of certain tribal societies who acts as a medium between the visible world and an invisible spirit world.
That's what I do...
I'm a shaman.
A shaman who just saved the world three months ago...
and apparently I need to do some more saving.
Doesn't a girl deserve a break now and again?
C.E. MURPHY
THUNDERBIRD FALLS

THUNDERBIRD FALLS is the follow-up to C.E Murphy's bestselling novel URBAN SHAMAN.

In stores now.

LUNA™ a world you can only imagine.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy&ScienceFiction
June • 57th Year of Publication

NOVELLAS

HALLUCIGENIA 59 **Laird Barron**

NOVELETS

ANIMAL MAGNETISM 6 **Albert E. Cowdrey**
COUNTERFACTUAL 37 **Gardner Dozois**
THE PROTECTORS OF ZENDOR 139 **John Morressy**

SHORT STORIES

WHY THE ALIENS DID WHAT THEY DID TO THAT SUBURB OF MADISON, WISCONSIN 56 **Tim McDaniel**
TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT 124 **C. S. Friedman**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 28 **Charles de Lint**
MUSING ON BOOKS 32 **Michelle West**
COMING ATTRACTIONS 123
FILMS: THE MASTER OF ERROR 133 **Lucius Shepard**
CURIOSITIES 162 **Bud Webster**

CARTOONS: Arthur Masear (55), S. Harris (132), Danny Shanahan (160).
COVER BY MAX BERTOLINI FOR "HALLUCIGENIA"

GORDON VAN GELDER, Publisher/Editor — BARBARA J. NORTON, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor — KEITH KAHLA, Assistant Publisher
HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor — JOHN J. ADAMS, Assistant Editor
CAROL PINCHEFSKY, Contests Editor — JOHN M. CAPPELLO, Newsstand Circulation
The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 110, No. 6, Whole No. 651, June 2006. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $3.99 per copy. Annual subscription $44.89; $54.89 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Periodical postage paid at Hoboken, NJ 07030, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.
Copyright © 2006 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
www.fsfmag.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The author of *Kushiel's Avatar* is back with a stunning new trilogy.

KUSHIEL'S SCION

From JACQUELINE CAREY, the national best-selling, award-winning author of the Kushiel's Legacy trilogy, comes KUSHIEL'S SCION.

"Lush, sensuous...a savory feast for mind and heart."
—*Booklist* (starred review) on *Kushiel's Avatar*

"[It] will appeal to both fantasy lovers and fans of erotic romance."
—*Publishers Weekly* on *Kushiel's Avatar*

"Sensual and captivating. Once you pick it up you won't want to put it down."
—Robert Jordan on *Kushiel's Chosen*

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN JUDE PALENCAR

JACQUELINE CAREY

AVAILABLE IN HARDCOVER

Read an Excerpt Online at www.twbookmark.com

WARNER BOOKS
Time Warner Book Group

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This story arrived in our offices about a week before Katrina arrived in New Orleans (and it was much more welcome, as you'd expect). After the hurricane moved on, Mr. Cowdrey was out of contact for a few weeks. His first post-Katrina communiqué said, "Thank goodness Trixie got out of the Ninth Ward in time!" Which is a good lead-in for your editor to salute all the animal rescue workers who ventured into New Orleans after the hurricane, and also to salute the many people who adopted homeless animals after Katrina. Let's hope the rescue teams didn't have to contend with any of the problems that Henry Greene faces...

Animal Magnetism

By Albert E. Cowdrey

WHEN HENRY GREENE'S live-in lover moved out, he called his sister Marylou, a syndicated advice columnist, to find out what to do next.

"I'm so sorry, Hen," she said, when he told her. "I always figured you and Clem were, like, permanent. I mean, you guys almost rhymed."

After four husbands Marylou knew a lot about splitting up. If she had cared to hyphenate her name, it would have been Greene-Marx-Allen-Gambino-Cosmas. For professional purposes, she was just Ask Marylou; she was still wondering what to call herself in private life.

"I'm having a rough time," said Henry, when the commiserations had petered out. "I don't know how to live alone anymore, and I'm afraid to go looking for another guy because I'm still in denial that Clem really is gone for good."

"It's too soon," she told him. "Don't rush things. It takes the best part of a year to get over a breakup. It's like a little death. In God's good time you'll start dating again."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WHAT THE SF COMMUNITY HAS BEEN WAITING FOR

NEW FICTION FROM

VERNOR VINGE

Rainbows End

A near-future epic adventure that focuses on a family dealing with the challenges of the technological advances of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. *Rainbows End* is triumphantly entertaining, and sure to satisfy those who have been eagerly awaiting a new novel from four-time Hugo Award–winner Vernor Vinge.

"Nobody sees the near future as clearly as Vernor Vinge. His notion of the 'Singularity' was one of the few genuinely new tropes in science fiction. Now *Rainbows End* is a glimpse of the shifty strangeness of a tech-drenched future. So plausible it's barely fiction at all."

—Stephen Baxter, author of *The Time Ships*

TOR

www.tor.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How do I get along till then? The house is so empty it scares me. I've forgotten how to sleep alone — keep waking up, wondering why I don't hear anybody breathing except me. This morning I found one of Clem's socks in the back of a drawer and started crying."

"Get a dog," Marylou commanded. "Go down to Japonica Street and get a nice dog from the SPCA. You'll be saving its life and at the same time you'll have a companion to tide you over. Get a female," she added. "They're so much less trouble than males."

"What, another bitch? And here I've been living with one for fifteen years?"

"See, your sense of humor's coming back already. That's a good sign, Hen. If you can laugh, you can live."

"You're a wise person, Marylou," said Henry soberly.

At the Camelot Oaks office of Greene & Gelhorn, Certified Public Accountants, March Madness was well underway — not the basketball frenzy, but the other and worse one caused by the income-tax deadline looming on the horizon.

Henry had to promise to take two of his partner's clients in order to palm off one of his own. Then he jumped into his Honda, swung onto I-10 and crossed half the sprawl of New Orleans to the Lower Ninth Ward, where the SPCA was located.

The forty-minute journey made him feel like Katharine Hepburn penetrating the heart of darkness in the *African Queen*. A confirmed suburbanite, he was accustomed to Camelot Oaks' clipped lawns, cobalt pools, tract houses, barbecue pits, baroque bird feeders, and its shopping center with hangar-like stores and parking lot the size of the Utah Salt Flats. Danger for him meant his evening jog around a seepage pond called Lancelot Lake, pursued by ill-tempered Canada geese and sometimes by teens in the poison-pimple stage who roared past in SUVs, yelling, "*Faggot!*"

The shining shores of the Industrial Canal belonged to another planet — a blue-collar multi-hued urban landscape of crowded cottages, teeming docks, gunfire at night, body bags in the morning. It even had its own language, as Henry discovered when he explained to a kindly lady behind the shelter's front desk that he wanted an adult housebroken female not given to excessive barking, biting, or excavating in the garden.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sound to me like a poifeck description of Trixie," she replied. "She been spaded too awreddy, her."

Henry said he'd look, and a boy fetched from the kennels a smiling blue-eyed bitch with a brown coat, a white widow's peak, and a goodly dash of Australian shepherd in her family tree.

Henry and the dog exchanged caresses. Trixie was the first to make her mind up, and sat down on his left foot to make sure he wouldn't get away.

"She's really nice," he muttered, wiping a warm glaze of spit off his chin. "How'd you get her? Was she lost, strayed, stolen?"

"Honey, all I know is somebody found her wanderin' and called us."

"Then how'd you know her name?"

The kindly lady looked baffled. "I dunno. Somehow I just looked at her and thought, Trixie. So I said, 'Trixie?' And she come prancin'."

"First dog I ever had that named herself," he muttered, and after paying for fees and spaying, left the SPCA leading his new housemate on a plastic leash.

At the Camelot Oaks shopping center, he filled the back of his car with supplies from Petco and dropped Trixie off at the local vet's for a checkup.

Shamus O'Neill, DVM, was a bulky sandy-haired man in a starched white coat. Trixie took to him at once as he scratched her ears, patted her head, and said with apparent sincerity, "She'll be a special dog." That evening after work Henry picked her up and took her six blocks to his house on Morgan la Fay Court with a clean bill of health and a receipted bill for ninety-five dollars in his pocket.

He'd had dogs in his life before — a placid mongrel, Grits; a proud Golden called Royal; a neurotic cockapoo named Freud; and a large aggressive dachshund, Orlando Furioso. In fact he'd never have gone dogless, except for his ex-lover. Orlando had been ruling the roost when Clem came along, bearing a thick menu of more or less psychosomatic ills, including sinuses that closed up completely in the presence of animal dander and left him talking like Donald Duck.

"Either the dog goes or I do," he quacked, with all the arrogance of an otherwise useless human being who gave, and knew he gave, Olympic-class head.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Henry temporized, installing a plastic Dogloo in the yard so that Orlando could sleep outside. But dogs raised indoors do not go gently into that good night. At the first opportunity, Orlando sneaked back inside, and when Clem tried to oust him the Furious One lived up to his name.

"Well, you know, dachshunds originally were bred for hunting," said Henry, while watching Clem get nine stitches in the ER at Ochsner Foundation Clinic.

"They were badger hounds," he added, as if that made the operation any more agreeable.

Marylou had to take Orlando into her opulent home at Beau Chêne, across Lake Pontchartrain. They adapted well to each other, and in fact she had a longer and more satisfying relationship with him than with Marx, Allen, Gambino, or Cosmas. After a ridiculously long life (twenty years), Orlando got cancer and had to be put down; his last act this side of eternity was to snap feebly at the vet administering the lethal injection. Marylou had him cremated, and kept his ashes on her living-room mantel in a red terracotta urn inscribed *Mon Ami Toujours.*

With Clem now out of the picture, Henry installed Trixie in a comfortable dog bed next to his own four-poster. He instructed her to stay in it all night, and she obeyed very nicely as long as he was awake. But about four o'clock the next morning, he woke to find something warm curled up against his spine, and the heat and gentle pressure gave such comfort to his lumbar vertebrae that he thought, "Well, just this once."

He went back to sleep, and slept profoundly until half an hour past his usual get-up time. When he rose at last, Trixie was back in her own bed. After that they played the same little domestic drama every night; she pretended to spend the whole night in the dog bed, and he pretended not to notice that she didn't.

So began the Honeymoon Period of their lives together. Henry was a sentimental type, and Trixie played him like a trout. Soon he was boring his partner Morris Gelhorn — a large, glum man whose many chins and stomachs gave him the look of a semi-deflated blimp — with accounts of her unqualified love, awarded for nothing more than a bowl of dry dog chow every day.

"And shelter and shots and license and medical care and so on," grunted Gelhorn, who had an idle, loutish late-teen son at home and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

naturally regarded all living creatures as ungrateful. Henry didn't agree. When he came home after a solid day of March Madness, and Trixie placed a paw on his knee and rolled her blue eyes at him, he reflected that in all their fifteen years together Clem never had looked half so loving, so quietly ecstatic, except maybe on those occasions when he was face down, and Henry couldn't check his expression.

Of course honeymoons, including interspecies honeymoons, don't last forever.

Henry was working longer and longer hours, and the only time Trixie had company was Wednesday, when his Honduran maid took the doorkey from under a flowerpot and spent a few hours pursuing a damp mop, watching the Spanish-language TV channel, and using his phone to gossip with her relatives in Tegucigalpa.

Besides being alone too much, Trixie lacked exercise. Like any shepherd-type dog, bred for chivvying sheep and harrying Herefords, she liked to run and run and run, while Henry increasingly was unable to find time even to trot with her around Lancelot Lake and be hissed at by the geese.

Out of excess energy or simple boredom she demolished a whole set of rattan porch furniture, comprising two armchairs, one rocking chair, and a small pedestal table. Henry came home to find her seated amid the wreckage, wagging her tail and looking at him with an expression that said more clearly than words, "So whatchoo expect me to do all day when you're off someplace having fun, hah?"

She developed an obsession with squirrels — there was something about the way they performed acrobatics that drove her a little mad; while they soared overhead she whined and danced and pranced and flattened Henry's bed of walking iris down below. One evening he discovered that a squirrel had misjudged its leap; Trixie was eating it, and when he tried to take away the sodden remnants, she growled and bared her teeth at him. Then she consumed the whole animal, including the big fluffy tail, and licked her chops.

Next day he risked Gelhorn's anger and left the office long enough to take Trixie back to Dr. O'Neill for a checkup. The vet reminded him that his roommate bore the genes of a hunter-scavenger ["sort of like *T. Rex*,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he said) and that millions of years of evolution were not to be undone by mere human squeamishness.

"I know all that," Henry protested. "I was worried about her digesting the fur and skull and teeth and whatnot."

"The pH in a dog's stomach is incredibly low," said O'Neill, scratching Trixie's ears while she looked blissful. He told stories about dogs of his professional acquaintance who had eaten, without apparent harm, a pair of deer antlers, ten pounds of walnuts in their shells, a three-foot-by-five-foot hooked rug, and a sack of chemical fertilizer. Then he sent Henry and Trixie home.

"So how you like living with a girl for a change?" asked Marylou some three weeks into Henry's new domestic arrangement.

They were dining at Emeril's Delmonico and both were deep in their crab-and-crawfish appetizers.

"She's sure an improvement on Clem," he replied, adding in his own mind, *except*.... And having secret thoughts of Clem's one undoubted talent.

At least he thought his thoughts were secret. As far as Marylou was concerned, they might as well have been written in italics on the wine card in the middle of the table.

"Try not to get all obsessive about sex," she advised, pausing between forkfuls. "I know you're used to having it and it's hard to do without, but when you get right down to brass tacks it's nothing but a lot of screwing around. What you need is to find yourself a nice guy you can relate to, instead of a narcissistic dumdum like Clem."

"I thought you liked Clem. So did Clem."

"Hen, Honey, I lied."

While they were waiting for the entree, she added, "When you think you've found somebody, bring him home and watch how Trixie reacts to him. Dogs've been studying human character for a long time and even if they can't talk, they always say exactly what they think."

"You mean if she bites him, I should ditch him."

"That's what Orlando tried to tell you," she said.

In addition to her destruction of squirrels and porch furniture, Henry decided that he also disliked Trixie's name, which struck him as trashy, banal, and uninspired.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He believed she could be persuaded to adopt another, provided it sounded somewhat like the old one. He tried Tess, Trish, Treena, Toni, and Thais, but Trixie would have nothing to do with any of them. Maybe she *had* named herself. When Henry called her by one of these counterfeits, she either ignored him completely or else gave him a cold blue look, as much to say, "So who're you, anyway — Herbie? Huey? What?"

One night, going on a month after he got her, Henry let her into the yard one last time before bed. She sniffed, peed, ran around, peed, growled at something invisible under the azaleas, barked at the moon, peed, and peed.

"Come on in, Thais," Henry mumbled.

He was tired, really tired. March had finally died of exhaustion, almost taking him with it. Henry's work that day had begun at seven A.M. cleaning up yesterday's business, and had ground to a halt just after nine P.M., when the last client recovered sufficiently from sticker shock to write a check to Greene & Gelhorn, take his completed 1040s, 1099s, 8829s, 6251s, and Schedules A through Z, and go home for a stiff drink.

Sourly Henry viewed the beauty of nature. The night was lovely. The almost-full moon glowed through an iridescent veil of thin high clouds; lawns were already growing and the smell of cut grass hung in the air; in the garden, angel's-trumpet and sweet olive wove garlands of scent.

Meanwhile Henry's eyes burned, his carpal tunnel syndrome ached, his guts were still protesting the fast food he'd eaten at his desk for lunch and dinner, his butt was numb from too much sitting, he was constipated — and he still had two weeks to go before April 15th.

"Come on in, goddamn you! Trixie!"

At the name she showed up, and followed him obediently upstairs. While he was brushing his teeth and swallowing a sleeping pill, a gulp of antacid, a baby aspirin to prevent heart attacks, a laxative, and a stool softener, she was getting comfortable in her bed. When he climbed into his, she was in the dead-roach position, flat on her back, front paws curled up.

"Sure, *you* can sleep," he said bitterly. "I'll probably lie here staring at the ceiling until dawn" — and conked out almost on the word. He half-awoke one time. Green numerals on his clock radio said 4:28. A warm,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

comforting body was lodged against his lumbar vertebrae. Dream-logged, he murmured, "Clem?"

"No, Trixie," said a plangent voice that was new to his subconscious mind.

Henry went back to sleep. When he got up in the morning — rather hurriedly, for the medicine was working — she was snoring in her dog bed.

Half an hour later, shaved and showered and lighter in mind and body, he retrieved his newspaper where it lay in a clump of wild violets. The sun exhaled a golden mist; shining droplets of dew trembled on the needle-sharp tips of a Spanish Dagger plant. Flocks of small green parrots flew overhead, screeching ecstatically, like roadies at a rock concert. The whole world was a fat bud, swollen and bursting with joy.

Henry unfolded the paper. The date was April 1. March Madness was over, but April Daze — which were worse — had begun.

The morning, after conning him, turned to ashes. Tess-Trish-Toni-Treena-Thais came bounding up and licked his hand.

"It's still income-tax season, and you're still Trixie, aren't you?" he asked sourly.

She gave him a big grin. The answer was obvious.

THAT NIGHT HENRY arrived home under a brilliant full moon. His own sharp-edged shadow accompanied him from his carport to the side gate and up the garden walk.

A timer had switched on lights inside. That and Trixie were supposed to protect his house when he was away. Speaking of Trixie, where was she?

He called and whistled, but the moonlight remained vacant and nothing seemed to inhabit the pitch-black shadows but amorous tree frogs and chirruping bugs. Henry was standing a few feet from the porch, blinking tired eyes, when a movement in a lighted window caught his attention.

A human figure passed before the light. Henry's feet and hands both turned cold, and he began to back away. His cell phone was in the car; call 911, he thought, report a break-in, wait for the cops. Then his front door opened and a young woman emerged, wearing his bathrobe.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Wow, Henry," she said, "I dunno whatchoo do all day, but you sure as hell must do a lot of it."

"Who," he said, "who — who — "

"I got the key from under the flowerpot. C'mon in. I figured you'd be bushed, so I heated you up a can of toitle zoop and made some hot garlic bread and opened a beer."

Baffled, he allowed her to usher him into his own living room. Close up she was small and intense looking, with candid blue eyes that he'd seen someplace before. She had thick brown hair with a streak of white that made him feel oddly that it hadn't turned white, it had just been that way from birth.

"Who are you?" he finally managed to ask.

"Trixie," she said. "I'da told you bout me before to, like, cushion the shock. Only I coulden. See, I'm a werewoman. I change when the moon is full. Sometimes it lasts only a few hours, sometimes a night, and sometimes two if the lunar influence is really really intense. Then I go back to being the usual me. Throughout the whole cycle, I keep my blue eyes." She batted them at him to underline her claim. And viewing her small pointed face, her hair, her smile, her glistening white teeth, inhaling her clean scent of dog soap, Henry found himself — against all odds — suspending disbelief.

"Wow!" he breathed. "That's practically incredible."

"Sugar, we live in a practically incredible universe, or haven't you noticed?"

While he ate and drank, Trixie sat across the table from him and told him about herself. He learned that she was four years old and that her transformations had begun when she was still a puppy. At first the changes had been partial, and lasted only fifteen to twenty minutes.

"Hooee, I'm glad I didn' hafta look at me when I was in between," she said. "I really gotta give Mama credit. Lotsa bitches woulda figured me for an intruder and attacked, you know. But she just thought I must be sick or something, and she'd lick me until I went back to being all dog."

"Any idea how you got like this?"

"Only thing I can figure, when Mama was pregnant she musta got bit by a were-sump'm. She was a feisty little mutt, her. Always figured she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could bite the males and get away with it. Only some of 'em wasn't gentlemen, you know, and bit back."

She asked Henry what he did all day long, but when he tried to explain she wanted to know what "money" meant. If she didn't grasp that, how could he explain taxation?

He finally said that he had to guard the premises of a man who, in return, gave them the food they ate. Trixie was impressed.

"Sugar, I didn' have no idea it took you all day long and part of the night to get me dog chow. You finished your din? Well then, come on upstairs and lay down and I'll rub your back for you. I mean, you rubbed mine often enough."

"Uh, Trixie, I don't want to get us off on the wrong foot. I don't know how to explain this, but I'm — uh — "

"You're queer?"

"Well...yeah."

"See this?" she asked, tapping one nostril. "The nose knows. I wasn't in this house ten seconds before I knew another guy had been living here — for a long time, too. And," she added, "I wouldn'ta liked him. He smelled like a cat."

"Maybe that's what Orlando thought," Henry reflected.

"Now come on, lemme help you get comfy, so you can sleep good and go back out tomorra and oin us more dog chow and stuff. And don't worry about sex. Since they spaded me — "

"Spayed," he corrected her.

"Yeah, since they spaded me I wouldn't pay no attention even if you was a big, beautiful Eyetalian mastiff, which to be honest you ain't."

About four the next morning, Henry awoke with Trixie curled up against his back. This time she was under the covers, rather than on top of them. He put one hand behind him and felt a nap of stiff fur.

For a few minutes he lay pondering the question of whether she'd changed back to a dog, or whether — as he suspected — his plainly incredible memories of last night merely meant that he'd been driven insane by the 2005 income-tax season.

"Whatever," he muttered, and being very tired soon fell back asleep. When he woke again, Trixie was agitating to be let out for her morning run, as doggy a dog as he'd ever seen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So I've gone crazy," he muttered. "How logical." And headed for the shower to begin another frantic day.

That evening the sky clouded up, rain fell, and the moon was hidden.

For a while before bed Henry sat in his favorite recliner, listening to the rain and wearily sipping a glass of Syrah, while Trixie lay at his feet, drowsing and occasionally waking to thump her tail on the floor.

"As soon as I can take some time off," he told her, "I'll find a good therapist and tell him about my hallucinations. Christ, I hope imagining you're a girl doesn't mean I'm going straight after all these years. I got troubles enough without ending up like Morris or Marylou."

The day had not been a good one, even as April Daze went. Gelhorn had been in a foul temper; after months of fighting with his handsome, sullen son Mark — and his wife, who usually took Mark's side — he'd shipped the youth off to a famous wilderness school, more in order to get rid of him than from any hope that backpacking and whitewater rafting would turn him into a tolerable human being.

"So he's Westward Bound," he concluded. "I just hope he keeps on going."

Henry had his own problems. While brooding yet again over what had gone wrong between him and Clem, he'd fed his office computer some data with a decimal point misplaced. It spat out a return showing that the client owed the IRS $11,673,922.98, and Henry signed as Preparer without noticing. Only the sharp eye of his secretary had prevented the return from being mailed out.

He'd been left considerably shaken: the client, he knew, had an aneurysm, and if he'd seen the return would probably have died on the spot.

Certified Public Accountants were not supposed to make errors, at least not of such a grotesque magnitude. They were also not supposed to see werewomen. Henry had been planning to go to Tahiti after the fifteenth to escape from his memories, relax on the beach, practice his French and check out the gay life of Polynesia, if any. Instead he'd be lying on the couch of some Dr. Krankheit, getting shrunk.

Goddamn.

He stroked Trixie's head, and she laid her chin beside her paw on his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knee, her blue eyes filled with the kind of love only animals know how to give. Henry reflected that if he forgot his baby aspirin tonight and consequently dropped dead tomorrow, she'd howl and moan and refuse to eat for a few days, then find another master and forget him.

That was how God or whoever had intended love to be — intense and simple and necessarily transient. Then why did his mind keep drifting back at the most inopportune moments to the narcissistic dumdum?

"Where did we go wrong?" he asked her, meaning by *we* the human species.

Maybe that was why he was hallucinating. Wrapped up hopelessly in the human tangle, he was envying Trixie her dog's life. But in that case, instead of imagining Trixie was human, why didn't he hallucinate himself as a dog?

"Woof," he said experimentally.

Trixie pricked up her ears and gave him a look that said clearly, "You nuts or sump'm?"

"Almost certainly," he said, tossed off his wine, and headed upstairs to bed, Trixie's toenails clicking on the steps behind him.

THE MOON was new. Silver-fringed clouds parted like theater curtains in the aftermath of an April shower. Down below, all the world throbbed with life — frogs mating in ditches, clover blossoms exploding across dark, wet, verdant lawns like firecrackers at a Chinese New Year celebration.

Henry sat huddled in his recliner. He had a headache, a new and painful hemorrhoid, heartburn, sweating palms, conjunctivitis, cold feet, and a conviction of impending disaster. A red eye was winking at him, but he paid no attention.

"Still a week to go," he muttered to Trixie, who was gnawing gently on one of his shoes. "I'm not gonna make it this time. I'm too old for this. I'm sure I have a heart condition. AIDS. Erosive esophagitis. *Something.*"

It was ten past midnight and he'd just gotten home. How easy it was, he reflected, to take on new clients in the dull days of summer, forgetting you'd have to do their taxes the following spring.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He finally noticed the winking red eye. Red-eyed himself, he stared at it for almost five minutes before realizing that his phone had a message for him.

"Hi, Honey!" exploded Marylou's overloud voice. His heart sank another notch. He knew that tone; his sister was about to fix him up with a guy she'd just met, who was exactly right for him.

"Didn't want to bother you at work, and your cellphone was turned off. So listen, Hen. I just met the most wonderful young man. He's a Fellow of the Academy of Interior Design, and he's redoing my house, and he's loose at the moment. So why don't you drive over on Wednesday for dinner, and — "

Henry's eyes traveled over the room in which he sat. His maid's idea of cleaning was to run a damp mop just to the edge of the furniture, for fear of disturbing the dust bunnies underneath. The sofa's cushions sagged from bygone sexual adventures, of which busted springs were the only memorial. The rug had been gnawed years ago by Orlando, more recently by Trixie. Moths were batting around inside the tattered shade of an old brass lamp for which Henry felt great though obscure affection.

Into this dump — so dearly loved, every grungy square foot of it — he was supposed to bring some interior decorator with a queer eye for the queer guy?

He hit the delete button, dialed Marylou's number, and told her machine, "Thanks for thinking of me, but right now I'm worked to death, and after the fifteenth I'll be, uh, traveling. Love you. Bye."

After that he put his face in his hands. He wished he was anywhere else. He wished he was anybody else. He wished Morris Gelhorn had sent him to Westward Bound instead of Mark. He wished that he, too, could just go and keep on going.

A paw was laid on his knee, and he raised his burning eyes and looked into Trixie's concerned blue ones. Contrary to that night when he'd gone looney, she couldn't talk, but dogs and masters were supposed to develop a kind of telepathic rapport over time, weren't they?

Was that why he seemed to hear — not passing through his ears but distilling itself inside his brain — echoes of a human voice? At first blurred, then clearer and clearer, the unmistakable plangent music of a Lower Ninth Ward accent, telling him:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Don'tchoo worry, Hon. I'ma fix you up good, and it won't be with no dismal little jerk with swatches, neither."

At last April 15th came and, incredibly, went.

The coda of the tax year was Henry's and Morris's secretaries making a midnight run to the post office, where federal employees on overtime were frantically postmarking the last-minute avalanche of returns.

In the office, the fax machines cooled down. The coffeemaker was unplugged. The computers' Cyclops eyes went blank. On the vast darkness of the shopping center's parking lot, with its puddles of light where toads newly roused from hibernation waited, hoping to snag a moth, Morris Gelhorn slowly inserted his large gut behind the wheel of his green Infiniti and drove away toward his unhappy home.

Henry turned out the office lights, put on the security system, and walked the six blocks to his own home. A car careened by, its occupants yelling, "*Faggot!*" At Lancelot Lake a big gander woke long enough to approach with neck extended, hissing like an anaconda. Henry hardly noticed; his feet slapped the pavements nervelessly, like Bozo's in size-eighteen clown shoes.

He spent the next week with his phones unplugged, mostly sleeping. Then he dragged out his gym bag, packed some jeans, T-shirts, and his bathing suit. Plus a handful of condoms and a tube of K-Y Jelly because, with life returning, lust revived and hope sprang eternal.

He tossed Trixie into the Honda's back seat, they hit the I-10 and escaped the city and drove down an endless corridor of pines to an out-of-the-way motel, a gay-friendly enclave on Mississippi's Redneck Riviera where he hid out from time to time. There they spent two days sunning, jogging up and down the beach, splashing in the chilly salt water, and watching sunsets of molten copper quench themselves someplace off Yucatan.

The third morning, Henry exited his room to find another vacationer, a neatly bearded guy with thick glasses, playing with Trixie. She waltzed back and forth between them, almost forcing the introduction: *Hi, I'm Henry. Hi, I'm Jim.*

During the course of the day they got chummy, and hooked up for the night. But Jim was headed to Florida, and Henry had a home and job to go

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back to, so that was that, except for promises both knew would not be kept. Nevertheless, it was a relaxed and rehumanized Henry Greene who tooled home along the interstate with Trixie's head sticking out of the car, tongue lolling and eyes half-closed in canine bliss.

Back at Morgan la Fay Court he fired up his laptop and began scrolling down a seemingly endless array of shrinks and therapists approved by his medical plan, baffled about which one to choose. He was still thinking it over when night fell, a full moon rose in a perfect sky, and Trixie changed again.

He wouldn't need psychotherapy after all. The werewoman was truly, incomprehensibly real.

She wouldn't let him watch her transform — as her voice told him from behind the closed bathroom door, "It's just too weird, Sugar, y'unnerstand what I'm sayin'?"

But after she'd had a hot shower and donned a robe, she let him into the steamy chamber. And there she was — the same small, neat female he remembered from the last time, with a white streak in her coarse, damp brown hair. She sat on the toilet lid while he used his hair drier, comb, and brush to complete her coiffure, and despite her species-driven hostility to cats, she almost purred with pleasure.

"Wow, it's like havin' a big sister, you know?" she enthused.

She joined Henry for a late supper, and he made one of his specialties, a kind of veal scaloppini with sage and heavy cream. After tasting it, Trixie told him, "You gotta noive, givin' me Alpo when you eat like this!"

Drowsy and replete, they were cuddled up in bed when Trixie murmured dreamily, "So, you still wanna guy? I mean, long term, like?"

"I guess so," he said. "Yeah, I do. Sex is great, but I also have this, you know, weird need for love."

"Okay, then," she told him. "Tomorra we go shopping."

"Shopping?"

"Yeah, for sump'm for me to wear when I'm a girl — sump'm nice, okay? This here's my chance to get me a nice new coat. Meantime I'm a shop for a guy for you. Nighty-night."

At ten A.M. he drove her to the shopping center, and while she waited, ears pricked and fangs ready to bite anybody who might try to jack the car,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Henry embarrassed himself in a shop called Guinevere's by buying her jeans, shirts, bras, Nikes, pantyhose and thongs.

The saleslady asked him pointedly if he liked *La Cage aux Folles*, and when he said not much, she murmured, "I guess it ain't authentic, huh?"

Then he visited Walgreens for certain items of an intimate nature he thought Trixie might find useful as a human female. (Tampons? He guessed not; after all, she'd been spaded.) Back at the car he deposited his heap of packages in the trunk, climbed in behind the wheel, and asked, "Where to next?" before remembering that she was no longer in talking mode.

So he sat quietly, the windows up, the A/C on low, the noise of the parking lot mostly excluded, just looking at her. She gazed back with hypnotic fixity, a kind of ecstatic attentiveness, while her message formed inside his head.

"You want to go to the *vet's*? Why? Are you sick?"

More silent communion followed; then Trixie began to whine.

"The vet," Henry said, trying to accommodate to the idea. Trying, so to speak, to take Dr. Shamus O'Neill out of the white coat he wore as a kind of mass-produced professional manikin. Out of the fumes of antiseptic and flea baths where Henry's mind had assigned him. Trying to locate his humanity.

"Yeah, him," the words formed in his mind. "And unless I been sniffing too many exhaust fumes and screwed up the old smeller, you gotta bigger surprise than that coming."

"I don't think he believed me when I said you'd been eating squirrels again," he told her.

Night and the moon had returned. She was wearing running attire and had her hair tied with a red ribbon she'd found in the back of Clem's chest of drawers.

"Good," she said, polishing off a last spoonful of roast oysters in garlic leek sauce with parmesan cheese — one of Henry's sublimest concoctions.

"I hope he didn't believe you," she concluded. "That way he knew you was really after sump'm else."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I was surprised when he just came out and asked if I wanted to go jogging tonight. Said he'd come by about nine...but why at night?"

"Well, Honey, the man woiks all day."

"I better get suited up. Are you sure he's gay? That's not the vibes I get."

"Go and get dressed."

"Besides, when he sees me with you, like you are now I mean, he'll think I'm straight."

"Nobody in their right mind would think you were straight. Now, shut up and go get dressed before I bite you."

The garden was blue, the white flowers ghostly, the red ones already submerged in the dusk. To the west, a last bar of sunlit cloud floated just above the evening star; to the east, a golden moon was rising.

Henry was nervous, depressed, fearful of making a new connection, fearful of not making a new connection. After all, who the hell was O'Neill? So he liked dogs, so what — *Hitler* liked dogs, for Christ's sake. Besides, the vet wasn't even good-looking...well, he was okay, maybe...sort of like Bruce Willis playing the plastic surgeon in *Death Becomes Her.* But....

Wrangling with himself, scuffing his feet, he followed Trixie through the gate and out into the dark and seemingly empty suburban street. They waited a while, strolling up and down.

"Well, that's it. He's a no-show — *aaak!*"

Out of the shadows of a bushy, fragrant privet hedge lurched the biggest dog Henry had ever seen. A heavy ruff of hair like a lion's mane clothed its powerful shoulders; its eyes flickered green when a car drove past; it yawned and displayed an array of teeth that might have drawn respect from a juvenile *T. Rex.*

"Ain't he sump'm?" Trixie enthused. "Let him sniff you, Henry. Only take it real, real easy. Like he is now he got some incredibly strong jaws, him."

Henry didn't need urging to be cautious. Someplace deep inside the wolflike being began a low indefinite rumble that might mean — rage? hunger? Maybe both?

Or maybe not. Gradually the sounds quieted. The beast sniffed and snorted, then turned and examined Trixie with gynecological candor.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yeah, it's me, Sweetheart," she said. "In the flesh."

At last he seemed content, and the three of them — the werewoman, the werewolf, the Certified Public Accountant — set off at a trot toward Lancelot Lake.

"Was he bitten by one of his patients?" Henry panted after a quarter mile.

"That's a possibility," said Trixie, moving along with the effortless, tireless lope of her fundamental kind. "Or maybe bein' like he is got him innerested in animals. I know it would me — uh, oh. Trouble."

The car that passed earlier had stopped near Lancelot Lake and cut its lights. Now the headlights suddenly flicked on, changed to highbeams, and the car started up with a roar, rushed at them and screeched to a halt by the curb. Three guys wearing hooded jackets jumped out, bearing in their hands wrecking bars, chains and a jack handle.

"*Yo bitch! Yo faggot!*" they yelled.

That was when the wolf, with a shrill eager whine, went into action. A hundred and ninety pounds of fur, muscle, and preternatural fury slammed into the muggers and they crashed against one another and collapsed in a tangle of twelve ill-coordinated limbs. When they were down the beast worried at them, driving its two-inch fangs selectively into rounded parts such as calves, thighs, butts, and deltoids while hysterical squawks and mewlings rose from his victims.

Maybe Dr. O'Neill disdained such witless adversaries; maybe even in his present form he felt some basic reluctance to dismember creatures who belonged, however distantly, to his other species. In any case, the muggers got away, hopping and squawking and tumbling headfirst into their car, which roared into motion, scattering weapons and tatters of clothing as it blasted away. Uttering blood-freezing growls, Dr. O'Neill was still chasing the car when he and it vanished from sight.

"Well, so much for our run," sighed Trixie, as lights began flicking on in surrounding houses. "I dunno what got people so agitated. Maybe all the screaming, you think?"

Back at home, Henry was having a nightcap and Trixie was seated on the busted couch, dabbing with spit at a run in her pantyhose, when he cleared his throat and said, "O'Neill is out."

"Aw, c'mon, Henry. Give the man a chance. He's only like this one

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

or two nights a month. The rest of the time he's mild-mannered Clark Kent, or whoever."

"Trixie, I can't handle this. Half the time I still think I must be crazy to believe you're a werewoman. So I'm supposed to develop a relationship with somebody who now and then turns into Lobo the Superwolf?"

Instead of answering she raised and half turned her head. But Henry, deep in his low-self-esteem monologue, failed to notice.

"Do I look like the kind of guy can handle a situation like that? I mean, I'm afraid of *geese*, for God's sake. I advise my clients against claiming a home office deduction because it might, just might, get them audited. I — "

"He's out by the garden gate," she interrupted. "And he wants to come in."

"Oh, Lord."

She rose to her feet. "Lissen. He's whining, he's so eager."

"I don't hear anything."

"Trust me. He's there, and he's a live one. So, you gonna go talk to him, or what?"

"I'll just tell him through the bars of the gate to go home," he muttered. "I'll promise to buy all my dog supplies from him instead of Petco. I'll promise to come see him in his office tomorrow and just not show up."

He opened the front door and stumbled down the garden path. Trixie followed. He could hear the whining now. From something he'd read he remembered that wolves and wild dogs don't bark, they whine and they growl and they —

Howl.

From beyond the gate, a low moan began and rose swiftly to a moonstruck ululation. Round and perfect, Luna blazed in the sky, and the wolf, etched in silverpoint, serenaded it. Henry forgot to breathe as his suburban garden turned into a pagan grove, where the moonlight and the scent of flowers and the wolfsong fused into a heart-stopping rite celebrating some deathless and dark and waste and wild divinity.

Then Trixie reached past his shoulder and unlatched the gate.

The wolf sprang, the gate flew open, and a heavy furry mass knocked Henry flat. The beast planted its paws on his chest and for a timeless moment its yellow eyes burned into his. Its rank breath fanned him and its long wet tongue licked his mouth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lightly, playfully almost, it took his right hand between its teeth and clamped down. Not too hard. Not enough to break the bones.

Just enough to draw blood.

Over the months that followed, Marylou was increasingly impressed by the way Henry was improving.

Not only had he stopped grieving over Clem. Not only had he found a new live-in lover. Not only was the L.I.L. a nice man, a professional, a respected part of the community.

No, Henry's improvement went beyond all that. Every day, in every way, he was looking stronger and better.

"You been working out, or what?" she asked him at one of their Delmonico dinners.

"Well, running a lot, anyway. Shamus and I take Trixie and we all go running together. Or," he added in the hoariest of dog-owner's jokes, "she takes us."

"You didn't get those big shoulders running," said Marylou, eyeing him critically, "unless you been running on all fours."

He smiled; he used to smile kind of tight-lipped, she remembered, but now he showed off all his nice white teeth.

"You won't believe this," he said, changing the topic, "but Clem came by the house. He actually wanted to move back in with me."

"He's got a nerve. What'd you do?"

"Didn't have to do anything. Trixie ran him off."

This produced a scream of laughter. "She bite him?"

"No, just nipped at his heels, the way shepherd dogs manage sheep. Shamus said she was herding him. It was a good thing she did — I was so pissed at Clem, I might've chewed him up."

Marylou, who rarely paid close attention to anybody, heard this as "chewed him *out.*"

"I wish you had," she said. "If anybody deserves it, he does.... How's Morris these days?"

"A lot happier. His son Mark went to Westward Bound and had a kind of epiphany. A grizzly bear chased him up a tree, and he was up there clinging to a branch while the bear tried to shake him down, when suddenly he flashed on what he wants to do with his life. He wants to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

become an accountant, join the firm, and never go outdoors again as long as he lives. Morris says he's hitting the books with incredible energy. We can use the help when income tax time rolls around next year."

"It's so nice when a young person finds himself. Any other news from Camelot Oaks?"

"Well, those damned geese have disappeared. You can actually walk around Lancelot Lake without being attacked. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals complained that somebody must've eaten them, but if so they didn't leave any evidence."

"Those homophobics still bothering you?"

"No. They've quieted down. In fact, when I see them they head off in the other direction."

"Maybe they're growing up. Learning some sense."

"If they want to, they better."

He regretted this indiscreet remark as soon as he made it. But Marylou's mind had moved on, and she paid no attention.

"You know, Hen, I *never never* pry. I mean, people come to me for advice, I don't push it on them. But I just find myself wondering if you've got the right guy. I mean, Shamus is sweet and all, and I like him — *really*, this time I mean it — but he seems kind of repressed. Almost too quiet."

"Trust me," smiled Henry. "When he's in the mood, the man is an animal."

At first Marylou felt a little shocked. For all her sophistication, she didn't like to dwell on the physical side of her brother's love life. But then a pensive, longing look came into her face.

"Do you think," she asked, "he might have a straight friend for me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Black Angel, by John Connolly, Atria Books, 2005, $25.

ANYONE who reads a lot knows that it's impossible to keep up with everything. But we're usually at least aware of the classic and popular writers. If nothing else, word of mouth keeps us up to date. We might not have read John Steinbeck, but we're aware of his importance (and if you haven't read *Cannery Row*, might I humbly suggest you do so at your earliest convenience?). We might not have read Stephen King, but we're certainly aware of who he is, and can probably even rattle off a title of two. Margaret Atwood might not be your cup of tea, but you'll have heard her name.

And then there are the books that are — for a time, at least — inescapable to the public consciousness: remember Robert James Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County*? Or how about the still-current *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, or any of J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" books?

As a reader, I'm comfortable in this knowledge. Sure, I'll miss a book here and there by making the reading choices I do, but while I've not necessarily read them, I've usually at least heard of the author before.

So it was a complete surprise to me to find, when I started to read John Connolly's *The Black Angel* and discovered just how good a writer he is, that he has published six well-received books but I've never heard of him before.

His novels and one short story collection are filed under some variation of mystery/thriller/crime fiction, and while that's an accurate enough classification, it doesn't tell the whole story, because this is definitely an author for the interstitial crowd.

The main character, Charlie Parker, is a private investigator, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the sections from his points of view follow a traditional first-person narration that's insightful, hard-boiled, and evocative of character, with absorbing observations of societal conventions, mythology, street life, theology, and the human condition.

But the novel opens with a description of the rebel angels falling from heaven, and we soon realize that the presence of some of these fallen angels isn't going to be simply allegorical. They're the book's principal antagonists. The fallen angels are real, walking hidden among us.

Now if this were a horror novel, we know how it would all play out: the protagonist faces terrible odds, many characters meet a horrific fate, but in the end, good will probably triumph.

And some of that is true. But the heart of this book isn't a thriller, or a P.I. mystery, or even the tangled *Da Vinci Code*-like revelations of centuries-old conspiracies that thread their way through the plot. Connolly's main concern here, and the struggle facing Parker, is the balancing of his responsibilities to his friends, his clients, and his family. They are, unfortunately, not mutually inclusive, and he's already lost one family (in one of the previous books, I assume).

There are also hints that Parker himself might be a fallen angel — or perhaps it's just that the villains think he is.

I was going to say that *The Black Angel* is a novel that transcends the various genres that mingle in its pages, but that would be a disservice to those very genres, all of which boast some of the best writing available to readers today. So instead, let me say that *The Black Angel* is that rare book that never goes where you expect it to, but the journey it takes us on is perceptive and intriguing, and it will leave its readers thinking about loyalty, families of choice and of blood, and the morality of the choices we are sometimes forced to make.

It takes us from NYC's mean streets to French monasteries, from charnel horror chambers to auction houses that specialize in outré collections. The prose is engaging throughout and — especially in the sections with Parker's first person narration — absorbing.

I can't guess at your reaction to this novel, but I'm going out to pick up the rest of his books to catch up.

Midnighters 2: Touching Darkness, by Scott Westerfeld, Eos Books, 2004, $15.99.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Midnighters 3: Blue Noon, by Scott Westerfeld, Eos Books, 2006, $15.99.

A quick recap here for those of you who haven't been following this series, or missed the discussion we had about the first volume way back in 2004:

Apparently, in the town of Bixby, Oklahoma, a day actually has twenty-five hours. One of those hours has been compressed into the moment of midnight, creating a place of refuge for dark creatures, banished there eons ago. But a few humans can also experience that hour.

These are the "Midnighters," of which there are only five at the present time, each of whom has a "power" — that only manifests during the day's twenty-fifth hour. One can float in the air, almost weightless; another can read minds; and the others have similar powers. During the Midnight Hour, the world is frozen, touched with a blue light, and the only thing standing between the darklings and the people trapped motionless in the blue are the five teens introduced to us in the first book.

Looking back at my review for *Midnighters: The Secret Hour* (in the June 2004 issue), I likened the book to a teen TV series such as you might find on the WB, and was a little dismissive with my comment that it wasn't a Big Think novel.

Well, it's not, really, and neither is the series as a whole, but it's addictive and entertaining, and turns out to have a lot of heart — all good qualities in a book, so far as I'm concerned.

If we continue the TV show analogy, *Midnighters 2: Touching Darkness* would be a "mythology" episode. We've already been introduced to the characters in the first book, so this one deepens the background, the *mythology* of Midnighters, darklings, and the secret hour of Midnight when they are the only ones who can walk in the world while everything around them is frozen.

We learn about ancient conspiracies, the not-so-benevolent history of previous Midnighters, and unhealthy alliances between humans and darklings. The dynamics of the five are also put to the test and the ending of book two leads nicely into the third volume, *Midnighters 3: Blue Noon*, which ups the ante considerably.

I don't want to talk too much about the details of the plots for fear of spoiling surprises for you. Just let me say that Westerfeld keeps the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

story going at a good pace and has deepened not only the mythology of the series, but also the characters. I really like the way the individuals and group dynamics continue to evolve and change, the characters reacting the way real people do, showing petty traits as well as selfless heroics.

And when they change, the changes remain. There aren't any cop-outs or easy answers.

The series is marketed as YA, but if you've enjoyed (going one last time to a TV analogy) shows such as *Roswell, Smallville*, or even *Buffy*, I think you'll appreciate what Westerfeld's doing here. To be honest, I don't know why some enterprising TV executive hasn't already picked up the rights to these books, because the world and characters that Westerfeld has created here would lend themselves to many seasons of entertaining television.

For now, we'll have to watch them on the movie screens in our heads, which — as any long-time reader will tell you — is always a better experience anyway.

A few issues back I reviewed Tim Pratt's *The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl* (Bantam Spectra) and mentioned that I would have liked an appendix of one or two Rangergirl adventures in illustrated form as they were described in the book.

Well, they still don't exist, so far as I know, but Pratt does have a nice Rangergirl Web site at *http://www.sff.net/people/timpratt/rangergirl.html* on which you can find a brand new Rangergirl story that you can download and read at your leisure. The whole thing's set in the world of Rangergirl, rather than that heady mix of our world and the alternate one that was in the novel, but it's a fun excursion, and it's free, so go check it out.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

The Wave, by Walter Mosley, Warner Aspect, 2006, $22.95.

States of Grace, by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Tor, 2005, $25.95.

Disappearing Nightly, by Laura Resnick, Luna, 2005, $13.95.

IT'S WINTER as I type, and there's been rain, snow, freezing rain, and the usual winter absence of sunlight, as well as the seasonal household contagions. As is my wont, I rifled through the stacks of books that teeter precariously on my staircase, looking for something to read that would distract me from the seasonal blues. But this month, books that I thought would serve that purpose failed to engage me. So I set them aside (reading time being frequently scant and therefore precious), and just began to randomly read until I found something that did the job.

The books I found have this in common: they're books. In genre. That's about the only unifying theme for this month's column.

Walter Mosley's novel *The Wave* is a briskly paced sf novel that takes place around now; the language is spare, the details scant, and the story itself just moves. It begins with a series of strange crank calls, and while those calls are frequent, Errol Porter finds them oddly comforting, because they remind him, in some strange way, of the nighttime dementia of his departed grandmother. Which makes Errol a slightly unusual man in the middle of emotional doldrums, the detritus of an unexpected separation from his wife of many years — his high school sweetheart, his only real love.

The slightly strange takes a turn for the stranger when the crank caller finally identifies himself as Errol's father — a man dead and buried nine years. I have a fondness

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for ghost stories, for the things in the past that haunt in way that is dark and elegiac. This wasn't exactly that, but I wasn't quite certain what to expect.

What I got was a very Robert Sawyer-esque speculative novel. Errol goes to the graveyard to confront the caller — and finds him. But the man that he finds is younger than he is, and his natural skepticism fights with his natural sense of compassion, until he decides to bring the raving stranger, who knows far more about his life than he should, home.

Errol's sister and his mother don't share the same skepticism that he does, and neither does the woman in whom he is interested; baffled by their acceptance, and baffled by his own reaction, he's totally unprepared for the government agents who show up at a street fair to whisk him away. They're looking for the man who claims to be his father, but they're not willing to let Errol out of their sight, and Errol witnesses firsthand things both horrific and strange — because his father is not the first man to rise from the grave.

He's just the most recent in what may be a world-threatening infestation.

Mosley doesn't philosophize overtly, and his protagonist is not a morose, deep thinker, but the novel touches on the things that make people what they are: baffled, hurt, angry, and loving by turns. In particular, if you like Robert Sawyer's novels, you should read this one.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's *States of Grace* features her much-loved vampire, St. Germain, this time in Venice during the height of Henry VIII's reign, where he is the wealthy publisher of a press devoted to books of merit. He is also a foreigner, and treads the political waters of the rich with care, grace, and the world-weary caution that thirty-five hundred years of existence generally press upon one. By his side is his servant of fifteen hundred years, and they converse in the Latin that is their comfort, a language forgotten to all but the church.

Where many modern vampire novels are thinly disguised romances, Yarbro's are not. Her St. Germain is affected by the long centuries of loss and the absence of life, and his existence is not so much fed by blood — although that's necessary — but by a strange communion with the living themselves. In this case, Pier-Ariana Salier, a young woman whose natural talent and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

passion for musical composition has caught his attention. He offers her his patronage, and the love that he can give, and there is a lovely passage in which he denies her the burden of gratitude — for he believes in her music, and believes that gratitude itself imposes an inequality between two people for which he has no desire.

Living in a city that is broken and webbed by running water is perhaps not the wisest of choices for a vampire, but it is here that he must be if he is to defend his press, and continue to publish those works he deems of import. He's a man on a mission with which any reader will sympathize.

But his varied interests are being shaken by religious difficulties between Protestants and Catholics, and his publishing venture's being questioned; he is being investigated by native Venetians, while at the same time commanded to appear before a tribunal in a distant country. In order to succor the men and women who serve him in that distant place, he leaves Pier-Ariana, and all of his affairs, in the hands of a financier, with strict instructions as to her care.

She doesn't wish to see him go, and with — as it turns out — good reason.

This is not a world in which women are equals. The historical period is portrayed realistically, and the characters' worries about their fate ring true; they are not helpless, but they have no real power and therefore few choices. St. Germain has seen so many civilizations rise and fall in his long exile that his view is different; he can both accept what *is*, and comment upon it, attempting to change things as he can without decrying the world at large.

Where Mosley's prose is sparse, Yarbro's is not; she describes the world in which St. Germain lives, the clothing he wears, the circumstances in which he travels, in perfect detail. Henry the Eighth is alive, well, and moving toward schism, and if St. Germain is not in England, the effects of the famous monarch's desire for divorce for the sake of dynasty can be felt across Europe. St. Germain is no stranger to danger or death; he is cautious because so much that he has held has vanished with time and the twists of fortune. He expects nothing to last — but struggles to preserve those things of value anyway, and that understated struggle, coupled with clear vision and a weary understanding of humanity, make him interesting.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I confess that I'm not the biggest fan of vampire novels in general, but there's so much that's pitch-perfect in Yarbro's elegant writing, I enjoyed this one greatly.

Last, and once again completely different, is Laura Resnick's latest. Unlike her previous novels — the two novels that formed *In Legend Born*, which were epic fantasies about war, treachery and the rise of heroes in a universe entirely of her own creation — this one is a contemporary fantasy set in New York City, featuring a heroine with the unlikely name of Esther Diamond. It's my guess that anyone burdened with that name would be practically driven into one of the creative arts, and to no one's surprise, Esther is an actress. A stage actress.

On this particular, trying evening, she is a green, half-naked fairy, although she *is* the understudy to Golly Gee (you may blame Ms. Resnick for the name), a not-quite-as-successful-as-she-would-like pop singer in a new musical that features magical tricks performed by a stage-shy magician whose ferocious wife is also the money behind the production.

When Golly Gee disappears into the proverbial thin air *during* a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

performance which leaves the show down one star, Esther is looking at the break of a lifetime — until she gets a mysterious letter warning her against performing in the play. She does what anyone sane would do — she goes to the police. Who are not so concerned with the disappearance during a performance of a Star who has a list of minor misdemeanors and a famous ego. Detective Lopez might just be slightly impressed with Esther, but perhaps not for her civic-mindedness in placing the report.

Not one to give up her big break easily, Esther is convinced that doing a disappearing act of her own might not be the wisest course of action when she discovers Golly Gee isn't the only magician's assistant who literally disappeared during the course of a stage-magician's gimmick — and the man who convinces her that there's more to the world than meets Esther's decidedly practical eye is one Max Zadok, a practitioner of arts that she would really, really have been happier knowing nothing about. But once she accepts the truth, or accepts that she's lost her mind, she mobilizes the troops, as they were — the other magicians who lost someone during a performance — and sets them off to find out whatever they can while she does some investigating of her own that may or may not be entirely legal. See Detective Lopez above.

There is more than a little zaniness in all of this, and to call Resnick's cast of characters colorful is to understate severely — but this is a light and sweet novel that never, ever takes itself too seriously. Full of wit and wry humor, this is a light confection of a book — the equivalent of a box of chocolates when you've got a sweet tooth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Since he left his position as editor of Asimov's *magazine, Gardner Dozois has been busily editing a variety of anthologies, including* Galileo's Children, Nebula Awards Showcase 2006, *and* One Million A.D.

To our good fortune, he has also been writing more fiction. His last story, "When the Great Days Came," appeared in our December 2005 issue. His new one is a very different sort of tale, an inquiry into What Might Have Been that is sure to interest longtime fans of science fiction who are likely to find an old friend or two herein...

Counterfactual

By Gardner Dozois

"If we reach the Blue Ridge Mountains, we can hold out for twenty years."

—General Robert E. Lee

CLIFF'S FOUNTAIN PEN rolled across the pull-out writing shelf again, and he sighed and reached out to grab it before it tumbled to the floor. The small ink bottle kept marching down the shelf too, juddering with each vibration of the car.

Writing on a train wasn't easy, especially on a line where the rail-bed had been insufficiently maintained for decades. Even forming legible words was a challenge, with the jarring of the undercarriage or a sudden jerk all too likely to turn a letter into an indecipherable *splat* or to produce a startled, rising line across the page, as if the ink were trying to escape the mundane limitations of the paper.

Scenery was a distraction too. Cliff had always loved landscapes, and he had to wage a constant battle against the urge to sit there and just look

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out the window, where, at the moment, pale armies of fir trees slowly slid by, while the sky guttered toward a winter dusk in washes of plum and ash and sullen red. But he'd be sharing this room tonight with three other reporters, which meant lights-out early and a night wasted listening to them fart and snore, so if he was going to get any writing done on the new Counterfactual he was working on for *McClure's*, it'd better be now, while his roommates were down in the bar with the rest of the boys.

Cliff opened his notebook, smoothed it, and bent over the page:

General Robert E. Lee put his hands on the small of his back and stretched, trying to ease some of the tension out of his aching spine. He had never been so tired, feeling every one of his fifty-eight years sitting on his shoulders like bars of lead.

For days, days that had stretched into an unending nightmare of pain and fatigue, he had struggled to stay awake, to stay erect in the saddle, as they executed a fighting retreat from the trenches and earthworks of Petersburg westward along the Appomattox River toward Lynchburg, Grant's Army of the James, which outnumbered his own forces four to one, snapping at their heels every step of the way. Thousands of his men had died along the way, and Lee almost envied the fallen — at least they could *stop*. But Lee couldn't stop. He knew that all eyes were on him, that it was up to him to put on a show of being indefatigable and imperturbable, tall in the saddle, regal, calm, and wholly in command. His example and the pride it inspired, and the love and respect the men felt for him, was all that was keeping his ragged and starving army going. No matter how exhausted he was, no matter how bleak and defeated were his inner thoughts, no matter how hopeless he knew his position to be, no matter how much his chest ached (as it had been aching increasingly for days), he couldn't let it show.

They had stopped for the night in the woods near Appomattox Court House, too tired even to pitch tents. There had been almost nothing to eat, even for the staff officers. Now his staff huddled close to him in the darkness, as if they depended on him for light and warmth as much as or more than the low-burning bivouac fire: ragged, worn-out men in tattered uniforms, sprawled on blankets

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spread on the grass or sitting on saddles thrown over tree-stumps, without even chairs or camp-stools anymore. Lee could see their eyes, gleaming wetly in the firelight, as well as feel them. Every eye was on him still.

The barking of rifles had started up again from General Gordon's rear-guard on the road behind them when the courier arrived. He was thin as a skeleton, like Death himself come to call. He saluted and handed Lee a sealed communiqué. "Sir, from General Grant."

Lee held the note warily, as if it was a snake. He knew what it was: another message from General Grant, politely suggesting that he surrender his army.

The question was, what was *he* going to say in return?

The car jolted, shuddered, and jerked again while momentum equalized itself along the length of the train, and Cliff lifted his pen from the paper, waiting for the ride to steady again. What *was* he going to say in return? That was the problem.

He had an arresting central image, one that had come to him whole: Robert E. Lee surrendering the Army of Northern Virginia to General Ulysses S. Grant, the soldiers lined up somberly along a country road, heads down, some of the Confederates openly in tears, Lee handing his sword to Grant while a light rain fell, both men looking solemn and grim.... How to justify it, though? Counterfactuals had become increasingly popular in recent years — perhaps because the public had been denied the opportunity to play soldier during the Great War — until they were now almost respectable as pulp stories went, and you could make decent money selling them. But in writing Counterfactuals, you had to provide some kind of tipping-point, some event that would have changed everything that came after — and it had to be at least superficially plausible, or the fans, armchair historians all, would tear you to pieces. Having the Confederates win the War was a common enough trope in the genre, and a number of stories had been written about how Lee had won at Gettysburg or had pushed on out of Virginia to attack and burn Washington when he had the chance, forcing capitulation on a terrified Union, but Cliff was after something more subtle — a tale in which the Confederates still *lost* the War, but lost it in a different way, with different

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

consequences as a result. It was hard to see what would have motivated Lee to surrender, though. True, he was nearly at the end of his rope, his men exhausted and starving, being closely harried by Union forces — but in the real world, none of that had brought him to the point of seriously contemplating surrender. In fact, it was at that very point when he'd said that he was determined "to fight to the last," and told his officers and men that "We must all determine to die at our posts." Didn't sound much like somebody who was ready to throw in the towel.

Then, just when things looked blackest, he had narrowly avoided a closing Union trap by breaking past Phil Sheridan at Appomattox Court House, and kept on going until he reached the Blue Ridge Mountains, there to break his army up into smaller units that melted into the wilderness, setting the stage for decades of bitterly fought guerilla war, a war of terror and ambush that was still smoldering to this day. It was hard to see what would have made Lee surrender, when he didn't contemplate it even in the hour of his most extreme need. Especially as he knew that he could expect few compromises in the matter of surrender and little or no mercy from the implacable President Johnson....

He was spinning his wheels. Time for a drink.

Outside, the sun had finally disappeared below the horizon, leaving behind only a spreading red bruise. The darkening sky was slate-gray now, and hard little flakes of snow were squeezing themselves out of it, like dandruff sprinkled across felt. This had been a terrible winter, especially following the devastating dust-storms that had ravaged the Plains states all summer long. He hoped that the weather didn't work itself into a real blizzard, one that might hold them up on the way back. Like everyone else, he wanted to get the ceremony over with and get back home before Christmas — even though all he really had to look forward to was a turkey sandwich at a Horn & Hardart's and an evening of drinking in a journalist's hangout with many of these same people with whom he was already sharing a train in the first place.

Cliff stored his notebook in his carpetbag, and pushed out into the corridor, which was rocking violently from side to side, like a ship in a high sea, as the track-bed roughened. He made his way unsteadily along the corridor, bracing himself against the wall. Freezing needles of winter cold stabbed at him between the cars, and then stale air and the smell of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

human sweat swallowed him as he crossed into one of the coach cars, which was crowded with passengers, pinch-faced civilians in threadbare clothes, including whole families trying to sleep sitting up in the uncomfortable wooden seats. Babies were crying, women were crooning to them, couples were fighting, someone was playing a Mexican song on a beat-up old guitar, and four Texans — Texans were being seen around more frequently these days, now that relations had been normalized with the Republic of Texas — were playing poker on one of the seats, with onlookers standing in the aisles and whooping with every turn of the cards. They all wore the stereotypical but seemingly obligatory Stetsons.

There were three more coach cars to push his way through, and Cliff was glad to get beyond them into the alcoves between the cars, even though the cold air nipped at him each time. He never had liked noise and crowds, which was one reason why he'd always preferred small towns to the big cities. With things the way they were, though, the big cities like Chicago and Minneapolis were where the work was, and so he had no choice but to live there, as long as the *Minneapolis Star* paid his bills.

Even out here, between the cars, he could smell the tobacco stink coming from the next compartment, and when he opened the door and stepped into the bar car, tobacco smoke hung in such a thick yellow cloud that he could barely see. Most of the newsmen on the train were in here, standing around the bar or sitting grouped on stools around the little tables. Like Cliff, most of them had shunned the dining car and brought bags of sandwiches from Chicago, to save their meager expense-account money for the bar.

Cliff was hailed with the usual derisive, mildly insulting greetings, and two of the boys squeezed apart to make room for him at the bar. He was well-enough liked by the other newsmen, although his hobby of writing Counterfactuals and Westerns, even the occasional Air War or Weird Fantasy, marked him out as a bit strange. Half of these guys probably had an unfinished draft of the Great American Novel stashed away in a drawer somewhere, their attempt at unseating Hemingway or Fitzgerald, but in public you were supposed to give lip-service to the idea that to a *real* newsman, the only kind of writing that mattered was journalism.

"Hey, Cliff," John said. "Finish another masterpiece?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Aw, he was probably just jerking off," Staubach said.

Cliff smiled tolerantly and bought a round. He was already several drinks behind. The *wunderkind* from the *Chicago Tribune* — he was supposed to be nineteen, but to Cliff it didn't look like he could be more than thirteen — was trying to get an argument about The Gathering Clouds of War in Europe going with Bill, a big amiable Michigan Swede who rarely paid any attention to anything outside of the box-scores on the sports page, unless it was a racing form. "The United States will never get involved in a foreign war," the kid was saying, in his surprisingly deep voice. "Bryant kept us out of the Great War, and Hoover will keep us out of this one, too." He was short and pudgy, pasty-faced, with a sullen, cynical, seen-it-all air unusual in one so young. For a while, a few of the boys had held the fact that he was a New York Jew against him, but he was basically good-natured behind his gruff exterior, and smart as a whip, with just the kind of savage black humor that reporters liked, and so most of them had warmed to him.

He was trying to get a rise out of Bill, who had been incautious enough to express mild Interventionist sentiments a few times in the past, but Bill wasn't rising to the bait. "Guess England and Germany will just have to take care of de Gaulle without our help," Bill said amiably. "They're up to it, I guess."

"We've got enough problems of our own without worrying about de Gaulle," John threw in.

"Fuck de Gaulle and the horse he fucking rode in on," Staubach said. "Who's got the cards?"

"Language, gentlemen!" old Matthews said sternly. They all jeered at him, but they acquiesced, Staubach rephrasing his question to "Okay, who's got the *frigging* cards?" Although he was as natty as ever, impeccably dressed, looking every inch the distinguished senior correspondent, Matthews had been drinking even harder lately than reporters usually drank, and was already a bit glassy-eyed. The kid was supposed to be his assistant, but everybody knew that he'd been writing his column for him, and doing a better job of it than Matthews ever had.

John had the cards, but they had to wait through another couple of rounds for one of the little tables to open up, as the more prosperous passengers, or those who were more finicky about their food, drifted off to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the dining car up front. "Crowded in here," Cliff commented. "Where are all the politicians, though? You'd think they'd be nine deep around the bar."

"Aw, they got a bar of their own, coupla cars up," Staubach said.

"Got the first three cars, all to themselves," Bill threw in, with a grin. "And a sergeant with a carbine on the platform outside, to make sure Lindbergh and the rest of them don't get bothered by the *hoi poloi*."

"Sure, little do they care that the poor bastard has to freeze his nuts off all the way to Montgomery," John said, which drew another admonishment of "Language!" from Matthews, although, as he was already more than half-fried, it was clear that his heart wasn't in it anymore. The bartender — who, on a train like this, traveling through the Occupied Territories, was likely to be a soldier in civilian clothes, with a carbine of his own tucked under the bar — grinned at them over Matthews's head.

At last a table opened up, and they settled in for their usual nickel-and-dime game of draw. Matthews kept fumbling with his cards, having trouble holding them in a proper fan, forgetting whose bet it was, and changing his mind about how many cards he wanted, and soon was the big loser — as big as it got in this penny ante game, anyway. Every time the kid lost a hand, he would curse with an inventive fluency that was almost Shakespearian, and that kept the rest of them chuckling. Since he never deigned to use the common "four-letter words," even Matthews couldn't really complain, although he grumbled about it. Bill played with his usual quiet competency and was soon ahead, although Cliff managed to hold his own and split a number of pots with him.

After about an hour and a half of this, the smoke and the noise, and the fact that Matthews was no longer able to keep from dropping his cards every time he picked them up, and was getting pissy about it, made Cliff deal himself out.

"Going back to the room," he said, "see if I can get a couple of pages done before the rest of you guys show up."

"Can't keep *Wild West Weekly* waiting," Bill said.

"Aw, he's just going to jerk off again," Staubach mumbled, peering at his cards.

Cliff waved at them and walked away, moving a little more unsteadily than was entirely justified by the lurching of the car. Truth was, left to his own devices, Cliff wasn't that heavy a drinker — but if you were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

going to be accepted by the boys, you had to drink with them, and reporters prided themselves on their ability to put it away, another way in which the kid — who seemed to have a hollow trunk, as well as two hollow legs — fit right in in spite of his youth. Cliff could feel that he was at the edge of his ability to toss it back without becoming knee-walking drunk, though, which would lose him respect with the boys, so it was time to call it a night.

There was snow crusted on the footplates between the cars now, although it didn't seem to be snowing anymore outside. Cliff decided that he'd better clear his head if he was going to get any writing done, and walked back through the now-darkened coach cars and the sleeping cars to the observation platform on the back of the rear car.

It was bitterly cold outside and Cliff's breath puffed in tattered plumes, but the snow had stopped and the black clouds overhead had momentarily parted, revealing the fat pale moon. They were still moving through thick forest, the snow-shrouded ghosts of the trees gleaming like bones in the darkness, but now the ground on one side of the track fell steeply away, opening the world up to space and distance and the dimly perceived black bulks of nearby hills. There was a fast little mountain stream down there, winding along at the bottom of the slope, and in the moonlight he could see the cold white rills it made as it broke around streambed rocks.

The train slowed while going up the next long incline, and a dark figure broke from the trees, darted forward, and sprang onto the observation platform, grabbing the railing. As Cliff flinched back in shock, the figure threw a leg over the railing and pulled itself up. It paused, sitting on the top rail, one leg over, and looked at Cliff. It was a man, thin, clean-shaven, with a large nose and close-cropped hair bristling across a bullet-head, clutching a bindle in one hand. As Cliff gaped, the man smiled jauntily, said, "Evenin', sport!", and put one finger to his lips in a shushing gesture. Then he swung his other leg over the railing, hopped down to the platform, and sauntered by Cliff, giving him a broad wink as he passed.

Up close, even by moonlight, you could tell that his clothes were patched and much-mended, but they seemed reasonably clean, and although he exuded a brief whiff of sweat and unwashed armpits and sour breath as he passed, it wasn't too strong or too rank. He couldn't have been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on the bum for too long, Cliff thought, or at least he must have been finding work frequently enough to enable him to keep himself moderately clean. The tramp disappeared into the car without a backward glance, presumably to lose himself among the coach-class passengers or find a water closet or a storage cubical to hide in for the night. There were thousands of such ragged men on the road these days, drifting from place to place, looking for work or a handout, especially down here in the Occupied Territories; the economy was bad enough in the States, but down here, whole regions had never really recovered from the War in the first place, the subsequent decades of guerrilla war and large-scale terrorism — with entire armies of unreconstructed rebels still on the loose and lurking in the hills, many of them by now comprised of the children and grandchildren of the original soldiers — tending to discourage economic growth...especially with raiders knocking down new factories or businesses as fast as they sprang up, to discourage "collaboration" with the occupying forces.

Cliff knew that he really should report the tramp to the conductor, but it was difficult to work up enough indignation to bother, and in the end he decided not to even try. It was hard to blame the guy for wanting to be inside the train, where it was warm, rather than out there in the freezing night.

Up ahead, around a long curve, you could see the engine itself now, puffing out bursts of fire-shot black smoke like some great, stertoriously gasping iron beast. The smoke plume wrapped itself back around the observation platform, making Cliff cough and filling his mouth with the ashen taste of cinders, and that, plus the fact that he was beginning to shiver, told him that it was time to go back inside. If his head wasn't clear by now, it wasn't going to be.

When Cliff got back to their compartment, though, it became obvious that it didn't matter; he wasn't going to get any more writing done tonight. The conductor had already rearranged the compartment into its sleeping configuration, folding away the benches and lowering two bunks from each opposing wall, one stacked above the other. Somewhat surprisingly, his roommates were already back from the bar. Matthews, in fact, was already soddenly asleep on one of the lower bunks, gurgling and snoring, still fully clothed, although Bill was fussing with him, trying to get him

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

undressed, with little success. Cliff gathered that the old man had passed out in the bar, or come near to it, and his compatriots had hauled him back to the roomette. Even out here, you could smell the booze coming off of him.

With the bunks folded down, there was hardly space enough for Bill and the kid to stand in the tiny compartment, and Cliff had to hover in the doorway, half out in the corridor, waiting for someone to make room for him. The kid at last got impatient with Bill's efforts to undress Matthews and bumped him aside, saying harshly, "Oh, leave the poor old *pfumpt* alone." With a curious tenderness that belayed the gruffness of his tone, he took off the old man's shoes and stowed them under his bunk, and loosened his tie. "He'll just have to sleep in his clothes for once like the rest of us, instead of those stupid woolen pajamas."

As if to demonstrate, Bill climbed into the other bottom bunk — fully dressed except for his shoes; it was a good idea to keep your wallet in your pocket, too, since sneak-thieves were known to riffle through bags left on the floor in a compartment while the occupants slept — and put his hat over his eyes. Cliff slid inside, now that some floor space had opened up, and closed the door on the corridor.

They had come down out of the hills by now, and stopped at a tiny station for no readily apparent reason. There was a small town out there, two or three streets of two-story storefronts laid out parallel to the tracks; some dilapidated old wooden houses with big overgrown yards set farther back. The storefronts carried faded signs that said things like "Hudson's Hickory House" or "Brown Furniture Company," but none of them looked like they'd been open for a while, and several had boarded-up windows. Nothing was moving out there except a dog pissing on a lamppole.

"What a dump!" the kid said, turning to look at Cliff. Up close like this, he had a habit of partially covering his mouth with his hand when he spoke; he was embarrassed about his teeth, which he never brushed; they were green. "No wonder all the colored folks moved up North."

"Getting lynched and shot and burned out by Lee's Boys probably had something to do with it too," Bill said dryly, lifting his hat for a second. "Turn off the light. I want to get some sleep."

The kid vaulted up into the bunk above Matthews. Cliff took his shoes off, stuffed his carpetbag into his bunk to use as a pillow, shut off the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

light, and climbed into the other upper in the dark, nearly falling when the car lurched as the train started moving again.

Cliff lay awake in the darkness for a while, feeling oddly apprehensive and jittery for no particular reason he could identify, listening to the snoring and moaning of his roommates. He tried picturing himself back on his grandfather's hill farm near the confluence of the Wisconsin and the Missisippi, playing fetch with his old buff-colored coon dog, and eventually the steady swaying movement of the car rocked him to sleep.

Even so, he'd wake up for a moment every time the motion of the train changed, slowing down or speeding up with a jerk and a lurch, opening his eyes to see, through the uncurtained top of the window, trees rushing by, the roofs of houses, bright lights on tall poles, more trees, and then his eyes would close, and he'd sleep again, the wailing of the train's whistle and the rhythmical clatter of its wheels weaving themselves through his dreams.

BY MORNING, they had outrun the winter. Here, there was no snow on the ground; browning, multicolored leaves clung stubbornly to the hardwood trees. Farther south, on the Gulf Coast or at least in Florida, it was probably still summer, palm trees swaying in balmy breezes, but they weren't going that far. This was the last leg of their journey, with only a couple of hours left until they reached Montgomery.

The room steward brought them a pot of coffee. Sensitized by the kid's remarks of the previous evening, Cliff noticed that the steward was a Mediterranean immigrant of some sort — Italian, Greek; recent enough to retain a heavy accent — where before the War, the job almost certainly would have been done by a colored fellow. It wasn't true that there were no colored people left in the Occupied Territories, of course — there were still families holding out here and there. But decades of large-scale terrorism had chased millions of them to the big cities of the North, where they had encountered other problems to replace the ones they'd left behind, and most of the medium-level jobs went to more recent (and reasonably white) immigrants like the room steward. Now the Open Door that had let people like the steward into the country was slamming closed as immigration policies were tightened, leaving millions of European refugees with nowhere to go. As someone whose father had immigrated

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from Prague only a generation before, Cliff sympathized with all of them, and with the exiled colored folk as well, unwelcome in either the South or North.

Bill slipped his shoes on and ducked out to fetch a bunch of doughnuts from the dining car. They ate while taking turns going to the WC at the end of the sleeper for sponge baths and to change into fresh clothes, although old Matthews was so glazed and hung-over that the kid had to guide him there and back, holding him by one arm. Bill teased him about this unmercifully, although he wasn't quite mean enough to ask the kid if he'd had to help Matthews bathe. He certainly had to help him dress, though, while Bill jeered, and Matthews, lost in his own world, stared at nothing anybody else could see. He clearly didn't have long to go before he reached the end of his rope, Cliff realized. Odds were that the kid would have his job before then anyway.

Outside, rundown white clapboard houses with incongruously large porches were slipping by, as well as burnt-out factories, cut banks of red clay, goats grazing in hilly yards, an occasional glimpse of a sluggish brown river. For the last half hour, they crawled by a huge Army base, home of one of the occupying divisions, although little was visible beyond the high walls and barbed wire except the red roofs of the barracks, a water tower, a big industrial crane of some sort. There were guard towers every few yards, with machine-gun emplacements at the top, giving the whole complex the look of a prison. Scrub woods, weed-overgrown lots, and heaps of rusting scrap metal for the next few minutes, and then the outlying freight yards for the Montgomery station began to roll past.

Montgomery was a big city for this part of the world. It had been in Yankee hands since the end of the War, and although it had suffered several major raids in subsequent years from unreconstructed Confederate forces, and had been shelled by terrorists more than once, it was still in pretty good shape. There were a few bombed-out buildings visible in the center of town, but most of them were busily being repaired, and the sounds of construction — hammering, workmen shouting, buzz-saws whining — were constantly heard here. Outside the train for the first time in more than a day, Cliff wished he'd brought a heavier coat; it wasn't as cold here as it had been up the track, in the hill country, but it was still brisk, and the pregnant gray clouds that were sliding by overhead promised rain

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that he hoped would hold off until after the ceremony. The air smelled of dust and ozone.

He caught a glimpse of the Vice President going by, his handsome features looking strained and a bit grim; one of the youngest Vice Presidents in history, Lindbergh hadn't been given a lot to do after his charm, good looks, and charisma had helped Herbert Hoover win the election, except to be trotted out on ceremonial occasions like this one that were important but not quite important enough to fetch the President out of the White House. He was accompanied by his son, a somber, silent little boy dressed like a miniature adult in suit and tie, and by the usual crowd of handlers and hangers-on, as well as by John Foster Dulles, Huey Long, Charles Curtis, and the rest of the senatorial party, and *their* people. All of the dignitaries were hustled into long black limousines and whisked away, the star reporters and big-name columnists — one of whom once would have been Matthews — scurrying after them, off to arrange interviews with local officials and whichever of the senators they could catch before they disappeared into backroom bars somewhere.

After the ceremony, there'd be the usual photo-op for clutch-and-grin shots of Lindbergh shaking hands with the outgoing Territorial Governor, Lindbergh and the pro-tem State Governor about to take office, Lindbergh and the Mayor, Lindbergh and the Mayor's big-breasted sister, and so on, and then, hopefully before it started pouring, they'd all rush back to the train station to file their stories via telegraph (there were no trunk lines through the Occupied Territories; it was difficult enough to keep the telegraph lines up). They'd all try to come up with some twist or angle on the same dry story, of course (Cliff hoped to get some pithy quotes from Huey Long, who'd been born in the Occupied Territories before moving North, carpetbag in hand, to seek his fortune, and who was a usefully Colorful Character, always good for a line or two of copy), and then they'd all pile back in the train and head back to Chicago, to be off to somewhere else a day or a week later. That was a reporter's life.

In the meantime, most of the newsmen crossed the tracks and headed for a café across the street from the station. It was just a dingy old storefront, with cracked and patched windows, the calendars on the walls the only decorations, but it was warm inside and smelled invitingly of cooking food. The pancakes and eggs weren't bad, either, although it was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

probably better not to know what animal the bacon had come from; even the bitter chicory brew that passed for coffee down here on the far side of the Embargo Line was tolerable. Most of the reporters ignored the grits, to the amusement of the local stringers who'd arranged to meet them here before the ceremony. Watching them, Cliff realized that although he had been born in Wisconsin and lived in Minneapolis, had only visited New York City once, and had never been to Boston in his life, he was a Yankee to the locals — they were all just Yankees to the locals, who didn't make any of the fine distinctions between them as to regional origins that they made amongst themselves, and who probably, truth be told, disliked them equally. Cliff wondered if this boded well for the years ahead, when they'd officially be fellow citizens once more, on paper, anyway.

Bill and Staubach and Hoskins from the *New York World* had started a political argument about just that, Bill thinking that officially readmitting Alabama to the Union (something that it had taken decades of economic sanctions and delicate negotiations to accomplish, in the face of Rebel reprisals against "collaborators" and a general population who were by no means wholeheartedly for the idea), as Virginia and the Carolinas and Arkansas had already been before it, as Mississippi and Louisiana and Georgia had *not*, was a good thing, putting more of the shattered jigsaw that had once been the Union back together — while Staubach and Hoskins thought that Reunification was a bad idea, that it would further drag the economy of the U.S. down, that the nation was in fact better off *without* the disaffected former States, especially with federal troops quartered on them to make sure they stayed down.

Cliff lost interest in the too-familiar argument and started thinking about his Counterfactual again. How would the world of his story have differed from the real world? He toyed with the conceit that in that Counterfactual world there might *also* be a Cliff, struggling to write a Counterfactual story about *his* world, and yet another Cliff in the *next* world, and so on — a vision of a ring of Alternate Earths, in each of which history had taken a slightly different course. There was a story idea there. Maybe somebody manning a way station of some sort in some isolated location, maybe out in the rural Wisconsin hill-country where he'd grown up, a station that allowed travel between the Alternate Earths. It was too weird an idea for Thurber at *McClure's*, probably for most of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Counterfactual market, but it could maybe be done as scientifiction. He'd written a few scientifiction pieces at the beginning of his career for *Marvel Tales* and *Wonder Stories Quarterly*, although they didn't pay as well as Counterfactuals. For all his prim pseudo-Victorian stuffiness, Lovecraft at *Weird Tales* liked wildly imaginative stuff; maybe he'd go for it....

"Wake up, Shakespeare," Staubach said, punching his arm. "Time to get going."

The reporters gathered up their equipment — Cliff had earlier hauled his battered old Speed Graphic out of his bag; the *Star*'s budget didn't stretch to sending a photographer as well — and shambled out through the streets of Montgomery. You could already hear a brass band playing in the distance.

There was a raised wooden stage set up in front of the State Capitol building, from whose white marble steps Jefferson Davis had announced the formation of the Confederacy (which was rubbing it in a bit too blatantly, Cliff thought, but nobody had asked him), with a podium and a microphone up front, and rows of cold-looking dignitaries sitting on camp-chairs lined up behind, including Lindbergh's little boy, who, sitting hunched up on himself, looked like he'd rather be inside drinking a cup of hot chocolate than sitting out here in the cold. No chairs for the color guard who surrounded the stage on two sides, weapons at port arms, or for the audience, who were packed in in front of the stage in a disorderly mass. Not a bad turnout for a chilly December day, Cliff thought as he and his compatriots wormed their way to the front, especially for a ceremony solemnizing a decision that by no means had the support of the entire citizenry. The real ratification ceremony would take place in Congress later, of course; this symbolic local ceremony was an excuse to show the flag — literally: a big one center-stage that snapped in the wind. And to give the local yokels a chance to bathe in the reflected glory of Lindbergh and the other bigwigs.

The sky was still threatening, although a lacuna had opened up in the slate-gray clouds, splashing watery sunshine around. A brisk wind had come up, scattering trash and discarded sheets of newspaper like frightened birds. Bill cursed and seized his hat to keep it from flying away. The faces of the men in the brass band were stiff and red with cold, the cheeks of the trumpet player bulging grotesquely out, as though he'd bitten off something too big for him to swallow.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The band stopped playing. The Territorial Governor made a long, rambling, fawning introduction of Lindbergh, who then stepped forward to the podium and began speaking himself. His face was also red with cold, and he kept sniffing, as if his nose was running. He was holding his hat in one hand to keep it from blowing away, and the rising wind made his tie flap up into his face from time to time, requiring him to smooth it back down.

Cliff raised his camera and dutifully took a photo of him, and then stopped listening. Christ, he'd heard a lot of speeches in his life! Very few of them worth listening to. He'd crib quotations from the transcripts the Press Secretary would hand out later. Instead of listening, he fell into a reverie about his Counterfactual. He thought he'd seen a psychological justification for Lee surrendering rather than fighting on. Suppose, unlike what had happened in the real world, Lincoln *hadn't* been assassinated at the Second Inaugural ceremony by John Wilkes Booth, the well-known actor and radical Confederate sympathizer, who'd been lurking in the inaugural crowd with a pistol? Suppose that Lincoln had instead gone on to actually serve out his second term? In the real world, there was known to have been an exchange of notes between Lee and Grant in April 1865, discussing the possibility of surrender; Lee had refused to come to terms, and instead had vanished with his army into the Blue Ridge Mountains to wage a hide-and-seek campaign of large-scale guerrilla war that had lasted far longer than even he could have possibly imagined it would. Others had taken their cue from Lee, Joseph Johnson with his Army of Tennessee, the dreadful Nathan Bedford Forrest, the even more terrible John Mosby and William Clarke Quantrill, who had already been waging guerrilla warfare in Missouri and "Bleeding Kansas." Jefferson Davis and the Confederate Cabinet had escaped into Texas, from where they'd continued to pursue the war for decades, until the Texans — always hard-pressed by Mexico on their southern border and out of patience with the arrogant high-handedness of the "Richmond Refugees" — had gradually lost interest in being a hold-out Confederate state and had reinvented themselves as a Republic instead.

But suppose Lincoln had still been President? It was well-documented that Lee and Lincoln had had great respect for each other as individuals, in an age where personal honor had been a real factor in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

human affairs. Suppose Lincoln had worked through Grant to mediate Lee's surrender, guaranteeing favorable terms for surrender and backing it with the force of his own personal word, terms that would enable Lee to surrender with some semblance of honor and dignity for himself and his hard-pressed men, terms that the vengeful Johnson never would have approved in *this* world? Would that have allowed Lee to justify the surrender of his army? And if Lee *had* surrendered, mightn't that have provided the cue for how others should act, just as Lee's defiant refusal to surrender had in the real world? If so, that one moment would have caused everything else to change....

It was in that moment that Cliff saw the tramp, the one from the train, standing a few yards away in the crowd, and from that instant on, he knew everything that was going to happen, detail for detail, like watching a play you've previously seen rehearsed.

The tramp, staring up at Lindbergh intently, his sallow, unshaven face as blank as wax, the cords in his neck standing out with tension. He swallows once, twice, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing, and then his hand inches toward his coat.

Everything has gone into slow motion. Cliff wills himself to lunge forward, and feels his muscles begin to respond, but it's like swimming through syrup, and he knows that he'll be too late.

The tramp comes up with a gun, an old model Colt Navy .36. Practically a museum piece by now, but it's clean and seems in good working order. The weak sunlight splashes from the barrel as the tramp raises the gun, slowly, infinitely slowly, it seeming to ratchet up in discrete jerky intervals, like film being manually advanced frame by frame.

Cliff is swimming forward through the encrusted, resistant air, bulling through it as you'd breast your way through oncoming waves, and even as the breath for a warning shout is gathering itself in his lungs, he finds himself thinking, *It's not my fault! There's a dozen ways he could have gotten here!* Yes, but there was only one way he *did* get here, in this world, in this lifetime, and if he'd only reported him to the conductor last night, everything would be different.... Everything has stopped now, time freezing solid, and he sees it all in discrete snapshots.

A woman standing on the steps of the State Capitol building, holding

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

up a baby so that it can have a better view. The baby is holding a rattle in one hand.

The trumpet player, cheeks no longer distended, lighting a cigarette and laughing at something the tuba player is saying.

Birds flying, caught on the wing, crossing the sky from left to right, something that would have been read as an omen in Ancient Rome.

John Foster Dulles saying something behind a raised hand, probably a scornful remark about Lindbergh's speech, to Charles Curtis.

Lindbergh's son scratching his nose, looking bored.

Lindbergh himself, pushing his tie out of the way again, a *moue* of annoyance crossing his face.

The tramp's face contorting into an intense, tooth-baring grimace of extreme, almost mortal, effort....

The gun fired.

At once, as if a sheet of glass had been shattered, time was back to normal, everything going *fast* again. Cliff staggered and almost fell, as other people in the close-packed crowd began to surge forward or back. The tramp's revolver barked twice more; the sharp reports hit the wall of tall buildings on the far side of the street and echoed back. Someone screamed, someone else shouted something incoherent. Then those nearest the tramp in the crowd swarmed over him, pulling his arm down. He disappeared under a knot of struggling men.

At the podium, Lindbergh staggered as if in concert with Cliff. His mouth half-open in shock, he grabbed the podium to keep himself upright, swayed, and then lost his grip and fell heavily to the stage. Some of the dignitaries had thrown themselves down at the sound of the first shot, Huey Long among them, but Charles Curtis had jumped up and grabbed Lindbergh's little boy as he threw himself forward with a scream, and was now wrestling with the child to keep him away from the body. Dulles had also stayed on his feet, and was now bending over the fallen Vice President, fumbling at him ineffectually with fluttering hands, his mouth working, although it was impossible to make out what he was saying over the rising roar of the crowd.

More screams, more shouts. Cliff could hear Bill, at his elbow, saying "Oh no! Oh no!" over and over again. Old Matthews looked as if someone had shot him as well, his face slack and ashen. The tramp was on his feet

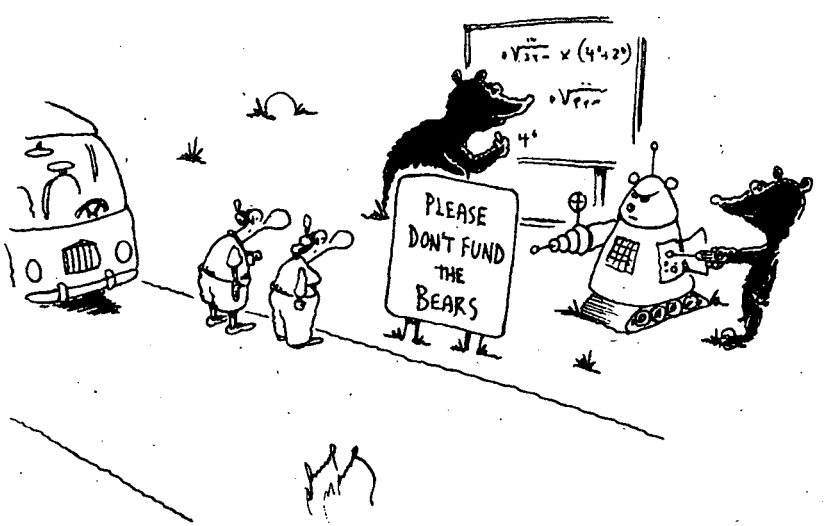
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again, still struggling against a half-dozen men who were trying to wrestle him back down. His face was scratched and battered now, splattered with blood.

"The South will rise again!" the tramp shouted, before they could pull him down, "The South will rise again!" And Cliff realized with horror that indeed it *would*, that it would keep on rising again, and again, as it had ever since the ostensible end of the War, dragging the country down like a drowning man dragging his rescuer down with him...that the War would never be over, that his children and their children would still be fighting it when he had long since gone to dust, dealing with the dreadful consequences of it, even unto the fifth generation and beyond, world without end.

Was there another Cliff writing about this right now, he wondered numbly, in some other Counterfactual world where, unlike here, it was only a remote abstract possibility that had never happened, good for an hour's academic entertainment and nothing more?

Behind him, the kid had already regained his wits and was running for the train station to file the story, leaving Matthews and the rest of them gaping in the dust and the cold rising wind.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Usually we keep to drawn cartoons around here, but this short piece struck the funny bones around our offices so well that we decided to run it. As one editor commented, "It's just so wrong*...in the right ways, that is."*

Tim McDaniel's previous appearance in our pages was "Le Morte d'Volkswagyn" back in our June 2000 issue. He lives in the Seattle area and teaches English as a second language.

Why the Aliens Did What They Did to that Suburb of Madison, Wisconsin

By Tim McDaniel

"DOESN'T DO IT FOR YOU, huh?"

Mary shook her head. She sat amid the rumpled sheets, her eyes downcast. Mark sat on the edge of the bed, slumped and sweaty.

Mark stripped off the latex mask and bent down to remove the velcro from his feet. "I'll put the iguanas back in their cage, then."

"Mmm hmm."

Mark returned to the bedroom and slapped his hands. "Well, what should we play then? Bill and Monica?"

Mary shook her head.

"Yeah, I guess that's been getting old. Thelma and Louise?"

Mary shrugged.

"Bush and Cheney? Flying Monkey and Toto? Spock and Worf?"

Mary thought not.

"Well, we can get the darts out again, or paint each other yellow and hang from the ceiling. Or get the weed whacker out, with the paint thinner. No? What, then?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, I don't know," said Mary. "It's getting harder to be original, I guess. You've been getting bored with the same old scenarios too. I know."

"Yeah. But there must be something. Shrek and Donkey?"

Mary looked at him. "Again?" She turned back to the window.

"Well, *what* then? Get out those sandpaper gloves? I know they're around here somewhere. Or get the laminating machine going? Maybe the garden gnomes and the ball bearings?"

"Oh, Mark. It's the same old thing, over and over. We need something *new*. Something weird, for a change."

Mark nodded. "Yeah. We have got ourselves into a rut."

They were silent for a while, each trying to come up with a proposal, a suggestion that would reignite their flagging sex life.

"Sometimes I wish I was just normal," Mary said. She got up and went to the bedroom window. "Someone who wouldn't mind just hopping into bed and doing it. Someone who can be content imagining their husband is Tom Cruise, instead of it always having to be a terrorist or a gerbil."

"Yeah," Mark agreed. "I know what you mean. But we are what we are, right?"

They lapsed again into silence.

"Hey. What's that?"

Mark looked up at the sound of Mary's voice. "What?"

"Out the window. That light."

Mark looked. "Huh. Looks like it's coming down."

"It's getting bigger, too."

Mark joined Mary at the window. "Is that a silvery dome at the top?"

"Looks like it. Or maybe, I don't know. Zinc or something. Titanium. Or aluminum."

They watched the glowing thing for a while. It settled down onto the meadow.

"Should we call someone? Mark asked.

"Who?"

"I don't know. NASA? The *Weekly World News*? Fox?"

Mary suddenly clutched Mark's arm. "There's something moving out there!" she whispered harshly. "There, in the bushes!"

"Jeez, you're right! And it's coming right toward us."

"It's clipping plants or something."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"If it keeps coming this way, it's going to move into the light soon. Yeah! There!"

"Eeew!" said Mary. "Look at that thing! All those spikes and warty knobs sticking out all over it."

"Yeah, and holes of every size poking *into* it. And it's oozing! It's slippery and gushing weird fluids from its bizarre orifices!"

Mary was breathing hard. "It looks soft and hard all at the same time. Look at it. It's quivering and pulsating! I think I can hear an eerie moaning sound!"

She looked at Mark.

Mark looked at her.

He was breathing hard, too.

"I'll get the baseball bat," he said. "After I stun it, you gotta help me carry it to the bed."

"Oh, Mark! *Yes!*"

Afterward, Mark lay on the bathroom floor, breathing in great gasps. Mary sat in the bathroom sink, although she had no memory of how she had come to be there. The alien quivered and throbbed in the tub.

"Oh, God!" Mary breathed.

"Yes, oh yes," Mark said. "Incredible."

"Better than that. If I could move, I'd jump right back onto it."

"I think I've strained every muscle, and broken a few bones, but I'd join you." Mark turned his head. "Hey, our friend is moaning again."

"It moaned a lot while we were doing it."

"Yeah. It's starting to flop around, too. You know what? I think it wants more!"

"More?" Mary said. "I'll be too exhausted for anything more strenuous than phone sex for a week!"

"Me too. But I guess he is what he is. Sorry, little guy. I guess it didn't do it for you, huh?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One of our most highly praised stories from 2005 was Laird Barron's hypnotizing and horrifying "The Imago Sequence" (from the May issue). Mr. Barron's follow-up is another ambitious, gravid tale of life's darkest sides. Be warned that this tale is not cheerful or upbeat, but we think it's another remarkable story from one of the most talented new writers around.

Hallucigenia

By Laird Barron

And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.
— Wallace Stevens

1.

THE BENTLEY NOSED INTO the weeds along the shoulder of the road and died. No fuss, no rising steam, nothing. Just the tick, tick, tick of cooling metal, the abrupt silence of the car's occupants. Outside was the shimmering country road, a desolate field, and a universe of humidity and suffocating heat.

Delaney was at the wheel, playing chauffeur for the Boss and the Boss's wife, Helen. He said to Helen, "She does this when it's hot. Vapor lock, probably." He yanked the lever, got out, and lighted a cigarette. His greased crewcut, distorted by the curve of the windshield, ducked beneath the hood.

Helen twisted, smiled at Wallace. "Let's walk around." She waggled her camera and did the eyebrow thing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Who are you, Newt Helmut?" Wallace was frying in the backseat, sweating like a bull, khakis welded to his hocks, thinking maybe he had married an alien. His big, lumpen nose was peeling. He was cranky.

Fresh from Arizona, Helen loved the bloody heat; loved tramping in briars and blackberry tangles where there were no lurking scorpions or snakes. She was a dynamo. Meanwhile, Wallace suffered the inevitable lobster sunburns of his Irish heritage. Bugs were furiously attracted to him. Strange plants gave him rashes. He wondered how fate could be so sadistic to arrange such a pairing.

Maybe Dad had been right. When he received the news of the impending nuptials, Wallace's father had worn an expression of a man who has been stabbed in the back and was mostly pained by the fact his own son's hand gripped the dagger. Paxton women were off limits! The families, though distanced by geography, were intertwined, dating back to when Dalton Smith and George Paxton served as officers during WWII. Dalton quailed at the very notion of his maverick sons mucking about with George's beloved granddaughter and obliterating a familial alliance decades in the forging. Well, maybe brother Payton could bag one, Payton was at least respectable, although that was hardly indemnity against foolishness — after all, *his* French actress was a neurotic mess. But Wallace? Out of the question entirely. Wallace Smith, eldest scion of the former senior senator of Washington State, was modestly wealthy from birth by virtue of a trust fund and no mean allowance from his father. Wallace, while having no particular interest in amassing a fortune, had always rankled at the notion he was anything less than a self-made man and proved utterly ingenious in the wide world of high finance and speculation. He dabbled in an assortment of ventures, but made his killing in real estate development. Most of his investments occurred offshore in poor, Asian countries like Vietnam and Thailand and Korea where dirt was cheap but not as cheap as the lives of peasant tenants who were inevitably dispossessed by their own hungry governments to make way for American-controlled shoe factories, four-star hotels and high-class casinos.

The trouble was, Wallace had been too successful too soon; he had lived the early life of any ten normal men. He had done the great white hunter bit in the heart of darkest Africa; had floated the Yellow River and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hiked across the Gobi desert; climbed glaciers in Alaska and went skin diving in Polynesia. The whole time he just kept getting richer and the feats and stunts and adventures went cold for him, bit by bit, each mountain conquered. Eventually he pulled in his horns and became alarmingly sedentary and complacent. In a manner of speaking, he became fat and content. Oh, the handsome, charismatic man of action was there, the high stakes gambler, the financial lion, the exotic lover — they were simply buried under forty extra pounds of suet following a decade of rich food and boredom. It was that professional ennui that provoked a midlife crisis and led him into the reckless pursuits of avocations best reserved for youngsters. Surfing and sweat lodges. Avant-garde poetry and experimental art. Psychedelic drugs, and plenty of them. He went so far as to have his dick pierced while under the influence. Most reckless of all, love. Specifically love for a college girl with world-beater ambitions. A college girl who could have been a daughter in another life.

Wallace returned Helen's smile in an act of will. "Why not? But I'm not doing anything kinky, no matter how much you pay me."

"Shucks," Helen said and bounced. Dressed in faded blue overalls, she resembled a slightly oversized Christmas elf.

Wallace grunted and followed. Hot as a kiln. It slapped him across florid jowls, doubled his vision momentarily. He absently unglued his tropical shirt from his paunch and took a survey. On the passenger side, below the gravel slope and rail, spread the field: A dead farm overrun with brittle grass and mustard-yellow clusters of dandelions on tall stalks. Centered in the morass, a solitary barn, reduced to postcard dimensions, half-collapsed. Farther on, more forest and hills.

He had lived around these parts, just west of Olympia, for ages. The field and its decaying barn were foreign. This was a spur, a scenic detour through a valley of failed farmland. He did not come this way often, had not ever really looked. It had been Helen's idea. She was eager to travel every back road, see what was over every new hill. They were not in a hurry — cocktails with the Langans at The Mud Shack were not for another hour and it was nothing formal. No business; Helen forbade it on this, their pseudo-honeymoon. The real deal would come in August, hopefully. Wallace's wrangling with certain offshore accounts and recalcitrant foreign officials had delayed the works long enough, which was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

why he did not argue, did not press his luck. They could do a loop on the Alcan if it made her happy.

Caw-ca-caw! A crow drifted toward the pucker brush. Wallace tracked it with his index finger and cocked thumb.

"You think somebody owns that?" Helen swept the field with a gesture. She uncapped the camera. Beneath denim straps her muscular shoulders shone slick as walnut.

"Yeah." Wallace was pretty sure what was coming. He glanced at his Gucci loafers with a trace of sadness. He called to Delaney. "What d'ya got, Dee?" Stalling.

Delaney muttered something about crabs. Then, "It ain't a vapor lock. Grab my tools. They're by the spare."

Wallace sprang the trunk, found the oily rag with the wrenches. He went around front, where a scowling Delaney sucked on another cigarette. The short, dusky man accepted the tools without comment. Greasy fingerprints marred his trousers. His lucky disco pants, tragically.

"Want me to call a wrecker?" Wallace tapped the cell phone at his hip. He made a note to send Delaney's pants to Mr. Woo, owner of the best dry cleaners this side of Tacoma. Mr. Woo was a magician with solvents.

Delaney considered, dismissed the idea with a shrug. "Screw it. I've got some electric tape, I'll fix it. If not, we'll get Triple-A out here in a bit."

"What can I do?"

"Stand there looking sexy, Boss. Or corral your woman before she wanders off into the woods."

Wallace noticed that his darling wife waded waist-deep in the grass, halfway across the clearing, her braids flopping merrily. He sighed, rolled his shoulders, and started trudging. Yelling at this distance was undignified. Lord, keeping track of her was worse than raising a puppy.

The crumbling grade almost tripped him. At the bottom, remnants of a fence — rotted posts, snares of wire. Barbs dug a red zigzag in his calf. He cursed, lumbered into the grass. It rose, coarse and brown, slapped his legs and buttocks. A dry breeze awoke and the yellow dandelion blooms swayed toward him.

Wallace's breath came too hard too quickly. Every step crackled. Bad place to drop a match. He remembered staring, mesmerized, at a California brushfire in the news. No way on God's green Earth — or in His dead

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

grass sea — a walrus in loafers would outrace such a blaze. "Helen!" The shout emerged as a wheeze.

The barn loomed, blanked a span of the sky. Gray planks, roof gone to seed wherever it hadn't crumpled. Jagged windows. In its long shadow lay the tottered frame of a truck, mostly disintegrated and entangled in brambles. Wallace shaded his eyes, looking for the ruins of the house that must be nearby, spotted a foundation several yards away where the weeds thinned. Nothing left but shattered concrete and charred bits of timber.

No sign of Helen.

Wallace wiped his face, hoped she had not fallen into a hole. He opened his mouth to call again and stopped. Something gleamed near his feet, small and white. Squirrel bones caught in a bush. A mild surprise that the skeleton was intact. From his hunting experience, he knew scavengers reliably scattered such remains.

Wallace stood still then. Became aware of the silence, the pulse in his temple. Thirst gnawed him. He suddenly, completely, craved a drink. Whiskey.

And now it struck him, the absence of insects. He strained to detect the hum of bees among the flowers, the drone of flies among the droppings. Zero. The old world had receded, deposited him into a sterile microcosm of itself, a Chinese puzzle box. Over Wallace's shoulder, Delaney and the car glinted, miniature images on a miniature screen. A few dusty clouds dragged shadows across the field. The field flickered, flickered.

"Hey, Old Man River, you having a heart attack, or what?" Helen materialized in the vicinity of the defunct truck. The silver camera was welded to her right eye. Click, click.

"Don't make me sorry I bought that little toy of yours." Wallace shielded his eyes to catch her expression. "Unless maybe you're planning to ditch poetry and shoot a spread for *National Geographic*."

Helen snapped another picture. "Why, yes. I'm photographing the albino boor in its native habitat." She smiled coyly.

"Yah, okay. We came, we saw, we got rubbed by poison ivy. Time to move along before we bake our brains."

"I didn't see any ivy."

"Like you'd recognize it if it bit you on the ass, lady."

"Oh, I would, I would. I wanna take some pictures of that." Helen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thrust the camera at the barn. Here was her indefatigable fascination — the girl collected relics and fragments, then let the images of sinister Americana stew in her brain until inspiration gave birth to something essay-worthy. The formula worked, without question. She was on her way to the top, according to the buzz. *Harper's*; *Poetry*; *The New Yorker*; and *Granta* — she was a force to be reckoned with and it was early in the game.

"There it is, fire when ready."

"I want to go inside for a quick peek."

"Ah, shit on that." Wallace's nose itched. The folds of his neck hung loose and raw. A migraine laid bricks in the base of his skull. "It isn't safe. I bet there's some big honking spiders, too. Black widows." He hissed feebly and made pinching motions.

"Well, yeah. That's why I want you to come with me, sweetness. Protect me from the giant, honking spiders."

"What's in it for me?"

She batted her lashes.

"A quick peek, you say."

"Two shakes of a lamb's tail," she said.

"Oh, in that case." Wallace approached the barn. "Interesting."

"What." Helen sounded preoccupied. She fiddled with the camera, frowning. "This thing is going hinky on me — I hope my batteries aren't dying."

"Huh. There's the driveway, and it's been used recently." The track was overgrown. It curved across the field like a hidden scar and joined the main road yonder. Boot prints sank into softer ground near the barn, tire treads and faint marks, as if something flat had swept the area incompletely. The boot prints were impressive — Wallace wore a thirteen wide, and his shoe resembled a child's alongside one.

"Kids. Bet this is a groovy spot to party," Helen said. "My senior year in high school, we used to cruise out to the gravel pits after dark and have bonfire parties. Mmm-mm, Black Label and Coors Light. I can still taste the vomit!"

Wallace did not see any cans, or bottles, or cigarette butts. "Yeah, guess so," he said. "Saw a squirrel skeleton. Damned thing was in one piece, too."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Really. There're bird bones all over the place, just hanging in the bushes."

"Whole birds?"

"Yup. I shot pictures of a couple. Kinda weird, huh?"

Wallace hesitated at the entrance of the barn, peering through a wedge between the slat doors. The wood smelled of ancient tar, its warps steeped in decades of smoke and brutal sunlight, marinated in manure and urine. Another odor lurked beneath this — ripe and sharp. The interior was a blue-black aquarium. Dust revolved in sluggish shafts.

Helen nudged him and they crossed over.

The structure was immense. Beams ribbed the roof like a cathedral. Squared posts provided additional support. The dirt floor was packed tight as asphalt and littered with withered straw and boards. Obscured by gloom, a partition divided the vault; beyond that the murky impression of a hayloft.

"My god, this is amazing." Helen turned a circle, drinking in the ambience, her face butter-soft.

Along the near wall were ranks of shelves and cabinets. Fouled implements cluttered the pegboard and hooks — pitchforks, shovels, double-headed axes, mattocks, a scythe; all manner of equipment, much of it caked in the gray sediment of antiquity and unrecognizable. Wallace studied what he took to be a curiously-shaped bear trap, knew its serrated teeth could pulp a man's thighbone. Rust welded its mouth shut. He had seen traps like it in Argentina and Bengal. A diesel generator squatted in a notch between shelves, bolted to a concrete foot. Fresh grease welled in the battered case.

Was it cooler in here? Sweat dried on Wallace's face, his nipples stiffened magically. He shivered. His eyes traveled up and fixed upon letters chalked above the main doors. Thin and spiky and black, they spelled:

THEY WHO DWELL IN THE CRACKS

"Whoa," Wallace said. There was more, the writing was everywhere. Some blurred by grease and grit, some clear as:

FOOL

Or:

LUCTOR ET EMERGO

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And corroded gibberish:

GODOFBLOATCHEMOSHBAALPEEORBELPHEGOR

"Honey? Yoo-hoo?" Wallace backed away from the yokel graffiti. He was sweating again. It oozed, stung his lips. His guts sloshed and prickles chased across his body. Kids partying? He thought not. Not kids.

"Wallace, come here!" Helen called from the opposite side of the partition. "You gotta check this out!"

He went, forcing his gaze from the profane and disturbing phrases. Had to watch for boards; some were studded with nails and wouldn't that take the cake, to get tetanus from this madcap adventure. "Helen, it's time to go."

"Okay, but look. I mean, Jesus." Her tone was flat.

He passed through a pool of light thrown down from a gap in the roof. Blue sky filled the hole. A sucker hole, that's what pilots called them. Sucker holes.

The stench thickened.

Three low stone pylons were erected as a triangle that marked the perimeter of a shallow depression. The pylons were rude phalluses carved with lunatic symbols. Within the hollow, a dead horse lay on its side, mired in filthy, stagnant water. The reek of feces was magnificently awful.

Helen touched his shoulder and pointed. Up.

The progenitor of all wasp nests sprawled across the ceiling like a fantastic alien city. An inverse complex of domes and humps and dangling paper streamers. Wallace estimated the hive to be fully twelve feet in diameter. A prodigy of nature, a primordial specimen miraculously preserved in the depths of the barn. The depending strands jiggled from a swirl of air through a broken window. Some were pink as flesh; others a rich scarlet or lusterless purple-black like the bed of a crushed thumbnail.

Oddly, no wasps darted among the convolutions of the nest, nor did flies or beetles make merry among the feculent quagmire or upon the carcass of the horse. Silence ruled this roost surely as it did the field.

Wallace wished for a flashlight, because the longer he squinted the more he became convinced he was not looking at a wasp nest. This was a polyp, as if the very fabric of the wooden ceiling had nurtured a cancer, a tumor swollen on the bloody juices of unspeakable feasts. The texture

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was translucent in portions, and its membranous girth enfolded a mass of indistinct shapes. Knotty loops of rope, gourds, hanks of kelp.

Click, click.

Helen knelt on the rim of the hollow, aiming her camera at the horse. Her mouth was a slit in a pallid mask. Her exposed eye rolled.

Wallace pivoted slowly, too slowly, as though slogging through wet concrete. *She shouldn't be doing that. We really should be going.*

Click, click.

The horse trembled. Wallace groaned a warning. The horse kicked Helen in the face. She sat down hard, legs splayed, forehead a dented eggshell. And the horse was thrashing now, heeling over, breaching in its shallow cistern, a blackened whale, legs churning, hooves whipping. It shrieked from a dripping muzzle bound in razor wire. Wallace made an ungainly leap for his wife as she toppled sideways into the threshing chaos. A sledgehammer caught him in the hip and the barn began turning, its many gaps of light spinning like a carousel. He flung a hand out.

Blood and shit and mud, flowing. The sucker holes closed, one by one.

2.

"You're a violent man," Helen said without emphasis. Her eyes were large and cool. "Ever hurt anyone?"

Wallace had barely recovered his wits from sex. Their first time, and in a hot tub no less. He was certainly a little drunk, more than a little adrenalized, flushed and heaving. They had eventually clambered onto the deck and lay as the stars whirled.

Helen pinched him, hard. "Don't you even think about lying to me," she hissed. "Who was it?"

"It's going to be you if you do that again," he growled.

She pinched him again, left a purple thumbprint on his bicep.

Wallace yelled, put her in a mock headlock, kissed her.

Helen said, "I'm serious. Who was it?"

"It's not important."

Helen sat up, wrapped herself in a towel. "I'm going inside."

"What?"

"I'm going inside."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Harold Carter. We were dorm mates," Wallace said, finally. He was sinking into himself, then, seeing it again with the clarity of fire. "Friend of ours hosted an off-campus poker club. Harold took me once. I wasn't a gambler and it was a rough crowd aiming to trim the fat off rich college kids like ourselves. I wouldn't go back, but Harold did. He went two, three nights a week, sometimes spent the entire weekend. Lost his shirt. Deeper he got, the harder he clawed. Addiction, right? After a while, his dad's checks weren't enough. He borrowed money — from me, from his other buddies, his sister. Still not enough. One day, when he was very desperate, he stole my wallet. It was the week after Christmas vacation and I had three hundred bucks. He blew it at a strip club. Didn't even pay off his gambling marker. I remember waiting up for him when he straggled in at dawn, looking pale and beat. He had glitter on his cheeks from the dancers, for God's sake. He smiled at me with the game face, said hi, and I busted him in the mouth. He lost his uppers, needed stitches. I drove him to the hospital. Only time I ever punched anyone." Which skirted being a lie only by definition. He had flattened a porter in Kenya with the butt of a rifle and had smashed a big, dumb Briton in the face with a bottle of Jameson during a pub brawl in Dublin. They'd had it coming. The porter had tried to abscond with some money and an antique Bowie knife. The Brit was just plain crazy-mean and drunk as a bull in rut. Wallace was not going to talk about that, though.

They lay, watching constellations burn. Helen said, "I'll go to Washington, if I'm still invited."

"Yes! What changed your mind?"

She didn't say anything for a while. When she spoke, her tone was troubled. "You're a magnet. Arizona sucks. It just feels right."

"Don't sound so happy about it."

"It's not that. My parents hate you. Mother ordered me to dump your ass, find somebody not waiting in line for a heart bypass. Not in those words, but there it was." Helen laughed. "So let's get the hell out of here tomorrow — don't tell anybody. I'll call my folks after we settle in."

Wallace's chest ballooned with such joy he was afraid his eyes were going to spring leaks. "Sounds good," he said gruffly. "Sounds good."

Wallace stood in the gaping cargo door of a Huey. The helicopter cruised above a sandy coast, perhaps the thin edge of a desert. The sea was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rigid blue like a watercolor. A white car rolled on the winding road and the rotor shadow chopped it in half. He recognized the car as his own from college — he had sold it to an Iranian immigrant for seventy-five dollars, had forgotten to retrieve a bag of grass from the trunk and spent a few sweaty months praying the Iranian would not know what it was if he ever found it. Was Delaney driving? Wallace wondered why a Huey — he had never served in the military, not even the reserves or the Coast Guard. Too young by a couple of years for Vietnam, and too old for anything that came about during the bitter end of the Cold War. Then he remembered — after the horse broke his leg, he had been airlifted to Harbor View in Seattle.

Soundless, except for Mr. Woo's voice, coming from everywhere and nowhere. God had acquired a Cantonese accent, apparently.

"Mr. Wallace, you are very unlucky in love, I think," Mr. Woo said from the shining air. He was not unkind.

"Three strikes," Wallace said with a smile. He smiled constantly. No one mentioned it, but he was aware. His face ached and he could not stop. "Gracie divorced me. Right out of college, so it doesn't count. A practice run. Beth was hell on wheels. She skinned me alive for what — ten years? If I'd known what kind of chicks glom onto real estate tycoons, I would've jumped a freight train and lived the hobo life. You have no idea, my friend. I didn't really divorce her, I escaped. After Beth, I made a solemn vow to never marry again. Every few years I'd just find some mean, ugly woman and buy her a house. Helen's different. The real deal."

"Oh, Mr. Wallace? I thought you live in big house in Olympia."

"I owned several, in the old days. She took the villa in Cancun. Too warm for me anyway."

"But this one, this young girl. You killed her."

"She's not dead. The doctors say she might come 'round any day. Besides, she's faster than I am. I can't keep up."

"A young girl needs discipline, Mr. Wallace. You must watch over her like a child. She should not be permitted to wander. You are very unlucky."

The chopper melted. Mr. Woo's wrinkled hands appeared first, then a plastic bag with Wallace's suit on a hanger. A wobbly fan rattled above the counter. "Here is your ticket, Mr. Wallace. Here is some Reishi mushroom for Mrs. Wallace. Take it, please."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Thanks, Woo." Wallace carefully accepted his clothes, carried them from the dingy, chemical-rich shop with the ginger gait of a man bearing holy artifacts. It was a ritual he clung to as the universe quaked around him. With so much shaking and quaking he wondered how the birds balanced on the wire, how leaves stayed green upon their branches.

Delaney met him at the car, took the clothes and held the door. He handed Wallace his walking stick, waited for him to settle in the passenger seat. Delaney had bought Wallace an Irish blackthorn as a welcome home present. An elegant cane, it made Wallace appear more distinguished than he deserved, Delaney said. Wallace had to agree — his flesh sagged like a cheap gorilla suit, minus the hair, and his bones were too prominent. His eyes were the color of bad liver, and his broad face was a garden of broken veins.

There were reasons. Two hip operations, a brutal physical therapy regimen. Pain was a faithful companion. Except, what was with the angry weals on his neck and shoulders? Keloid stripes, reminiscent of burns or lashes. Helen was similarly afflicted; one had festered on her scalp and taken a swath of hair. Their origin was on the tip of Wallace's tongue, but his mind was in neutral, gears stripped, belts whirring, and nothing stuck. He knocked back a quart of vodka a day, no problem, and had started smoking again. A pack here or there — who was counting? He only ate when Delaney forced the issue. Hells bells, if he drank enough martinis he could live on the olives.

Delaney drove him home. They did not talk. Their relationship had evolved far beyond the necessity of conversation. Wallace stared at the trees, the buildings. These familiar things seemed brand new each time he revisited them. The details were exquisitely rendered, but did not con him into accepting the fishbowl. Artificial: the trees, the houses, the windup people on the shaded streets. Wallace examined his hands: artificial too. The sinews, the soft tissues and skeletal framework were right there in the X-ray sunlight. He was Death waiting to dance as the guest of honor at *Día de los Muertos*.

Wallace was no longer in the car. The car melted. It did not perturb him. He was accustomed to jumpcuts, seamless transitions, waking dreams. Doctor Green said he required more sleep or the hallucinatory episodes would intensify, destroy his ability to function. Wallace wondered if he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ever slept at all. There was no way to be certain. The gaps in his short-term memory were chasms.

He was at home in the big house his fortune built, seated stiffly on the sofa Beth, ex-wife number two, had procured from Malaysia along with numerous throw rugs, vases, and some disturbing artwork depicting fertility goddesses and hapless mortals. He did not like the décor, had never gotten around to selling it at auction. Funny that Beth took half of everything and abandoned these items so punctiliously selected and obtained at prohibitive expense. Wallace's closest friend, Skip Arden, suggested that Beth always hoped things would change for the better, that she might regain favor. Skip offered to burn the collection for him.

Wallace's house was a distorted reflection of the home he had grown up in, a kind of anti-mirror. This modern house was designed by a famous German architect that Beth read of in a foreign art directory. Multi-tiered in the fashion of an antique citadel, and, as a proper citadel, it occupied a hill. There was an ivy-covered wall, a garden, and maple trees. Mt. Rainier fumed patiently in its quarter of the horizon. At night, lights twinkled in the town and inched along the highway. Wallace's personal possessions countered the overwhelming Baroque overtones — his hunting trophies, which included a den crammed with the mounted heads of wild boars, jaguars, and gazelles; and his gun collection, a formidable floor-to-ceiling chestnut-paneled cabinet that contained a brace of armament ranging from an assortment of knives and daggers native to three dozen nationalities, to an even greater array of guns — from WWII American issue Browning .45 automatics up to show-stopping big-game rifles: the Model 76 African .416 and his pride and joy, a Holland & Holland .500, which had come to him from the private collection of a certain Indian prince, and was capable of sitting a bull elephant on its ass. Littered throughout the rambling mansion was the photographic evidence of his rough and wild youth; mostly black and white and shot by compatriots long dead or succumbed to stultified existences similar to his own. The weapons and the photographs grounded his little hot air balloon of sanity, but they also led to *thinking*, and he had never been one to dwell on the past, to suffer introspection. They were damning, these fly-buzz whispers that built and built with each stroke of the minute hand, each wallowing undulation of the ice in his drink. *You always wanted to be Hemingway. Run with the*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bulls; fire big guns and drink the cantinas dry. Maybe you'll end up like the old man, after all. Let's look at those pistols again, hmm? And when such thoughts grew too noisy, he took another snort of bourbon and quieted the crowd in his skull.

Outside his skull, all was peaceful. Just Wallace, Helen, Helen's aides, Cecil and Kate, Delaney, and Bruno and Thor, a pair of mastiffs that had been trained by Earl Hutchison out in Yelm. The dogs were quietly ubiquitous as they patrolled the house and the grounds. The gardener called on Friday; the housecleaner and her team every other weekend. They had keys; no one else bothered Wallace except Wallace's friends.

These friends came and went unexpectedly. Ghosts flapping in skins. Who? Skip and Randy Freeman made frequent guest appearances. Barret and Macy Langan; Manfred and Elizabeth Steiner. Wallace thought he had seen his own father, though that was unlikely. Dad divided his time between the VFW, the Masonic Temple, and the Elks Lodge, and according to reports, his participation at social gatherings was relegated to playing canasta, drinking gin, and rambling about "The Big One" as if he had jubilantly kissed a nurse in Times Square to celebrate V-Day only last week.

"She's getting worse," Skip said as he helped himself to Wallace's liquor. "You should ship her to Saint Pete's and be done with it. Or send her home to ma and pa. Whatever you've got to do to get out from under this mess." He was talking about Helen, although he could have been discussing a prize Hereford, or an expensive piece of furniture. His own wife hated him and refused to live under his roof, it was said. Skip, a reformed attorney-at-law, was older and fatter than Wallace. Skip drank more, too, but somehow appeared to be in much better shape. His craggy features were ruddy as Satan under thick, white hair. Egregiously blunt, he got away with tons of indiscretions because he was a basso profundo who made Perry Mason sound like a Vienna choirboy. Jaws slackened when he started rumbling.

"Is she?" Wallace nodded abstractedly. "I hadn't noticed."

"Yes she is, and yes you have," said Randy Freeman, the radical biologist. Radical was accurate — he had bought *The Anarchist's Cookbook* and conducted some experiments in a gravel pit up past the Mima Mounds. Which was how he had blown off his right hand. His flesh-tone

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

prosthesis was nice, but it was not fooling anybody. He had recently completed a study of the behavior of crows in urban environments and planned to write a book. Randy was a proponent of human cloning for spare parts.

Skip said, "Nine months. Enough is enough, for the love of Pete, you could've given birth. Pull yourself together, get back on the horse. Uh, so to speak. You should work." He gestured broadly. "Do *something* besides grow roots on your couch and gawk."

"Yeah," said Randy.

"I do things, Skip. Look, I got my dry cleaning. Here it is. I pick it up every Thursday." Wallace patted the crinkly plastic, rubbed it between his fingers.

"You're taking those pills Green prescribed."

"Sure, sure," Wallace said. Delaney sorted the pills and brought them with a glass of water at the right hour. Good thing, too. There were so many, Wallace would have been confused as to which, where, and when.

"Well, stop taking them. Now."

"Okay." It was all the same to Wallace.

"He can't stop taking them — not all at once," Randy said. "Wallace, what you gotta do is cut back. I'll talk to Delaney."

"We'll talk to Delaney about this, all right. That crap is eating your brain," Skip said. "I'll give you some more free advice. You sue those sonsofbitches that own that Black Hills property. Jerry Premus is champing at the bit to file a claim."

"Yeah...he keeps calling me," Wallace said. "I'm not suing anybody. We shouldn't have been there."

"Go on thinking that, Sparky. Premus will keep the papers warm in case your goddamned senses return," Skip said.

Wallace said, "She *is* getting worse. I hear strange noises at night, too." It was more than strange noises, wasn't it? What about the figure he glimpsed in the garden after dusk? A hulking shadow in a robe and a tall, conical hat. The getup was similar to but infinitely worse than the ceremonial garb a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan might wear. The costumed figure blurred in his mind and he was not certain if it existed as anything other than a hallucination, an amalgam of childhood demons, trauma, and drugs.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He looked from his reflection in the dark window and his friends were already gone, slipped away while he was gathering wool. Ice cubes collapsed in his glass. The glass tilted slackly in his hand. "Nine months. Maybe Skipperoo's got a point. Maybe I need to wheel and deal, get into the old groove. What do you think, Mr. Smith?" Wallace spoke to his glum reflection and his reflection was stonily silent.

"Mr. Smith?" Cecil's voice crackled over the intercom, eerily distorted. They had installed the system long ago, but never used it much until after the accident. It was handy, despite the fact it almost gave Wallace a coronary whenever it started unexpectedly broadcasting. "Do you want to see Helen?"

Wallace said, "Yes; be right up," although he was sickened by the prospect. Helen's face was a mess, a terrible, terrible mess, and it was not the only thing. Whenever Wallace looked at her, if he really looked at her a bit more closely after the initial knee-jerk revulsion, the clouds in his memory began to dissolve. Wallace did not like that, did not like the funhouse parade of disjointed imagery, the shocking volume of the animal's screams, the phantom reek of putrescence. The triple pop of Delaney's nickel-plated automatic as he fired into the horse's head. Wallace preferred his thick comforter of pill- and alcohol-fueled numbness.

Dalton had asked him, *You really love this girl? She isn't like one of your chippies you can bang for a few years and buy off with a divorce settlement. This is serious, sonny boy.*

Yeah, Dad. 'Course, I do.

She a trophy? Better Goddamn well not be. Don't shit where you eat.

Dad, I love her.

Good God. You must have it bad. Never heard a Smith say that before....

Wallace pressed the button again. "Is she awake?"

"Uh, yes. I just finished feeding her."

"Oh, good." Wallace walked slowly, not acknowledging Delaney's sudden presence at his elbow. Delaney was afraid he would fall, shatter his fragile hip.

One of Wallace's private contractors had converted a guestroom into Helen's quarters. A rectangular suite with a long terrace over the garden. Hardwood floors and vaulted ceilings. They needed ample space to house

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her therapy equipment — the hydraulic lift and cargo net to transport her into the changing room, the prototype stander which was a device designed to prevent muscle atrophy by elevating her to a vertical plane on a rectangular board. She screamed torture when they did this every other afternoon and wouldn't quit until Cecil stuck headphones over her ears and piped in Disney music.

Helen lay in bed, propped by a rubber wedge and pillows. During the accident, her brain was deprived of sufficient oxygen for several minutes. Coupled with the initial blunt trauma, skull fractures, and bacterial contamination, the effects were devastating. Essentially, the accident had rendered Helen an adult fetus. Her right hand, curled tight as a hardwood knot, was callused from habitual gnawing. She possessed minimal control of her left hand, could gesture randomly and convulsively grasp objects. Cecil splinted it a few hours a day, as he did her twisted feet, to prevent her tendons from shortening. Her lack of a swallow reflex made tube-feeding a necessity. She choked on drool. It was often impossible to tell if she could distinguish one visitor from another, or if she could see anything at all. Cortical blindness, the doctors said. The worst part was the staph infection she contracted from her open head wound. The dent in her skull would not heal. It refused to scab and was constantly inflamed. The doctors kept changing her medication and predicting a breakthrough, but Wallace could tell they were worried. She had caught a strain resistant to antibiotics and was essentially screwed.

"Hi, Mr. Smith." Cecil carefully placed the feeding apparatus into a dish tub. He was a rugged fellow, close to Helen's age. Built like a linebacker, he was surprisingly gentle and unobtrusive. He faithfully performed his myriad duties and retreated into the adjoining chamber. It was always he or his counterpart, the RN Kate, a burly woman who said even less than Cecil. She dressed in an official starched white pinafore over her conservative dresses with a white hat. Wallace knew when she was around because she favored quaint, polished wooden shoes that click-clocked on the bare floors. Ginger Rogers, he privately called her. Ginger Rogers tapping through the halls.

Helen flinched and moaned when Wallace took her hand. Startle reflex, was the medical term. She smiled flaccidly, eyes vacant as buttons. She smelled of baby powder and antiseptic.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wallace heard himself say, "Hey, darling, how was dinner?" Meanwhile, it was the raw wound in her forehead that commanded his attention, drew him with grim certainty, compounded his sense of futility and doom.

Abruptly exhausted, he whispered farewell to Helen and shuffled upstairs and crawled into bed.

3.

After the world waned fuzzy and velvet-dim, he was roused by the noises he had mentioned to Skip and Ken. The night noises.

He pretended it was a dream — the blankets were heavy, his flesh was heavy, he was paralyzed but for the darting of his eyes, the staccato drum roll in his chest. The noises came through the walls and surrounded his bed. Faint sounds, muffled sounds. Scratching and scrabbling, hiccupping and slithering. Soft, hoarse laughter floated up to his window from the garden.

Wallace stashed a .357 magnum in the dresser an arm's length from his bed. He could grab that pistol and unload it at the awful giant he imagined was prowling among the rosebushes and forsythia and snowball trees. He closed his eyes and made fists. Could not raise them to his ears. The room became black as pitch and settled over him and pressed down upon him like a leaden shroud. Grains of plaster dusted the coverlet. *Pitter-pat, pitter-pat.*

4.

Detective Adams caught Wallace on a good morning. It was Wallace's fifty-first birthday and unseasonably cold, with a threat of rain. Wallace was killing a bottle of Hennessy Private Reserve he'd received from Skip as an early present and shaking from a chill that had no name. However, Wallace was coherent for the first time in months. Delaney had reduced the pills per Skip's orders and it was working. He was death-warmed-over, but his faculties were tripping along the tracks right on schedule. He toyed with the idea of strangling Delaney, of hanging him by the heels. His mood was mitigated solely by the fact he was not scheduled for therapy until

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Thursday. Possibly he hated therapy more than poor shrieking Helen did.

Detective Adams arrived unannounced and joined Wallace on the garden patio at the glass table with the forlorn umbrella. Adams actually resembled a cop to Wallace, which meant he dressed like the homicide cops on the television dramas. He wore a gray wool coat that matched the streaks in his hair. A square guy, sturdy and genial, though it was plain this latter was an affectation, an icebreaker. His stony eyes were too frank for any implication of friendliness to survive long. He flicked a glance at the mostly empty bottle by Wallace's wrist. "Hey there, Mr. Smith, you're looking better every time I swing by. Seriously though, it's cold. Sure you should be hanging around like this? You might get pneumonia or something. My aunt lives over in Jersey. She almost croaked a couple years ago."

"Pneumonia?"

"Nah, breast cancer. Her cousin died of pneumonia. Longshoreman."

Wallace was smoking unfiltered Cheyenne cigarettes in his plushest tiger-striped bathrobe. His feet were tinged blue as day-old fish. His teeth chattered. "Just when you think spring is here, winter comes back to whack us in the balls. One for the road, eh?"

Detective Adams smiled. "How's everything? Your hip...?"

"Mostly better. Bones are healed, so they say. Hurts like hell."

"How's your wife?"

"Helen's parents are angry. They want me to send her to Arizona, pay for a home. They're...yeah, it's screwed up."

"Ah. Are you planning to do that?"

"Do what."

"Send her home."

"She's got a lot of family in the southwest.... Lot of family." Wallace lighted another cigarette after a few false starts.

"Maybe sending your wife to Arizona is a good idea, Mr. Smith. Heck, a familiar setting with familiar faces, she might snap out of this. Never know."

Wallace smoked. "Fuck 'em. What's new with you, Detective?"

"Not a darned thing, which is pretty normal in my field. I just thought I'd touch base, see if any more details had occurred to you since our last palaver."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"When was that?"

"Huh? Oh, let me check." Adams flipped open a notebook. "About three weeks. You don't remember."

"I do now," Wallace said. "I'm still a little mixed up, you see. My brain is kind of woozy."

"Yeah," Adams turned up the wattage of his smile. "I boxed some. Know what you mean."

"You talk to Delaney? Delaney saw the whole thing."

"I've spoken to everyone. But, to be perfectly clear, Delaney didn't actually see *everything*. Did he?"

"Delaney shot the horse."

"Yes, I saw the casings. A fine job under pressure."

This had also been present in each interview; an undercurrent of suspicion. Wallace said, "So, Detective, I wonder. You think I smashed her head in with a mallet, or what?"

"Then broke your own hip and somehow disposed of the weapon before Mr. Delaney made the scene? Nah, I don't suppose I think anything along those lines. The case bothers me, is all. It's a burr under my saddle blanket, heh. We examined the scene thoroughly. And...without a horse carcass, we're kinda stuck."

"You think Delaney did it." Wallace nodded and took a drag. "You think me and Delaney are in it together. Hey, maybe we're lovers and Helen was cramping our style. Or maybe I wanted Helen's money. Oops, I have plenty of my own. Let me ponder this, I'll come up with a motive." He chuckled and lighted another cigarette from the dwindling stub of his current smoke.

Wallace's humor must have been contagious. Detective Adams laughed wryly. He raised his blocky cop hands. "Peace, Mr. Smith. Nothing like that. The evidence was crystal — that horse, wherever it went, just about did for the two of you. Lucky things turned out as well as they did."

"I don't feel so lucky, Detective."

"I guess not. My problem is, well, heck, it's not actually a problem. There's something odd about what happened to you, Mr. Smith. Something weird about that property. It's pretty easy to forget how it was, standing in there, in the barn, screening the area for evidence. Too easy. Those pylons were a trip. Boy howdy!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Don't," Wallace said. He did not want to consider the pylons, the traps, or the graffiti. The imagery played havoc with his guts.

"Lately, I get the feeling someone is messing with my investigation."

"Please don't," Wallace said, louder.

"My report was altered, Mr. Smith. Know what that means? Somebody went into the files and rewrote portions of the paperwork. That doesn't happen at the department. Ever."

"Goddamn it!" Wallace slammed his fist on the table, sent the whiskey bottle clattering. His mind went crashing back to the barn where he had regained consciousness for several seconds — Helen beside him in the muck, dark blood pulsing over her exposed brain, surging with her heartbeat. He covered his eyes. "Sorry. But I can't handle talking about this. I don't like to think about what happened. I do whatever I can to not think about it."

"Don't be offended — I need to ask this." Adams was implacable as an android, or a good telemarketer. "You aren't into any sort of cult activity, are you? Rich folks get bored, sometimes they get mixed up with stuff they shouldn't. I've seen it before. There's a history in these parts."

"There's history wherever you go, detective. You ought to ask the people who own that property — "

"The Choates. Morgan Choate."

"They're the ones with all the freaky cult bullshit going on."

"Believe me, I'd love to find Aleister Crowley's nephew was shacking there, something like that. Solve all my headaches. The Choate place was foreclosed on three years ago. Developer from Snoqualmie holds the deed. This guy doesn't know squat — he bought the land at auction, never set foot on it in his life. Anybody could be messing around out there."

Wallace did not give a tinker's damn about who or what might be going on, he was simply grateful they would be grinding that barn into dust and fairly soon.

Detective Adams waited a moment. Then, softly as a conspirator, "Strange business is going on, Mr. Smith. Like I said — we checked your story very carefully. The Smith name carries weight in this neck of the woods, I assure you. My boss would have my balls if I hassled you."

"Come on, my pappy isn't a senator anymore. I'm not exactly his favorite, anyway."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just doing my job, and all that."

"I understand, Detective. Hell, bad apples even fell off the Kennedy tree. Right?"

"I'm sure you're not a bad apple. You seem to be a solid citizen. You pay your taxes, you hire locally, and you give to charity."

"Don't forget, I donated to the Policeman's Ball five years running."

"That's a write-off, sure, but it's worth what you paid. Ask me, your involvement is purely happenstance. You're a victim. I don't understand the whole picture, yet. If there's anything you haven't told me, if you saw something.... Well, I'd appreciate any help you might give me."

Wallace lifted his head, studied Adams closely. The cop was frayed — bulging eyes latticed with red veins, a twitch, cheeks rough as Brillo. Adams's cologne masked the sour musk of hard liquor. His clothes were wrinkled as if he'd slept in them. Wallace said, "As far as I'm concerned, it's over. I want to move on."

"Understandable, Mr. Smith. You've got my number. You know the drill." The detective stood, peered across the landscaped grounds to the forest. A peacock strutted back and forth. A neighbor had raised them in the distant past; the man lost his farm and the peacocks escaped into the wild. The remaining few haunted the woods. The bird's movements were mechanical. Back and forth. "Do me a favor. Be careful, Mr. Smith. It's a mean world."

Wallace watched Adams climb into a brown sedan, drive off with the caution of an elderly woman. The brake lights flashed, and Adams leaned from the window and appeared to vomit.

Daylight drained fast after that.

5.

Wallace pulled on the loosest fitting suit in his wardrobe, which was not difficult considering how the pounds had melted from him during his long recovery. He knotted a tie and splashed his face with cologne and crippled his way downstairs to the liquor cabinet and fixed himself a double scotch on the rocks. He downed that and decided on another for the road. Sweat dripped from him and his shirt stuck to the small of his back and hips. He sweated nonstop, it seemed, as if the house were a giant sauna

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and yet he routinely dialed the thermostat down to the point where he could see his own breath.

Pain nibbled at him, worried at his will. He resisted the urge to swallow some of the heavy-duty pills in his coat pocket — promises to keep. Then he went somewhat unsteadily to the foyer with its granite tiles and a marble statue of some nameless Greek wrestler and the chandelier on its black chain, a mass of tiered crystal as unwieldy as any that ever graced the ballroom of a Transylvanian castle or a doomed luxury liner, and reported to Delaney. Delaney eyed him critically, dusted lint from his shoulder and straightened his tie while Wallace dabbed his face with a silk, monogrammed handkerchief, one of a trove received on birthdays and Christmases past, and still the sweat rilled from his brow and his neck and he wilted in his handsome suit. Delaney finally opened the front door and escorted him to the car. The air was cold and tasted of smog from the distant highway. Delaney started the engine and drove via the darkened back roads into Olympia. They crossed the new Fourth Avenue Bridge with its extra-wide sidewalks and faux Gaslight Era lampposts that conveyed a gauzy and oh so cozy glow and continued downtown past unlit shop windows and locked doors to a swanky restaurant called The Marlin. The Marlin was old as money and had been the *It* spot of discerning socialites since Wallace's esteemed father was a junior senator taking lobbyists and fellow lawmakers out for highballs and graft.

Everyone was waiting inside at a collection of candlelit tables near the recessed end of the great varnished bar. People, already flushed with their martinis and bourbons and cocktails, rose to shake his hand and clap his back or hug him outright and they reeked of booze and perfume and hairspray and cigarettes and talked too loudly as they jostled for position around him. The Johnsons and Steiners attended as a unit, which made sense since so many of their kids were intermarried — it was exceedingly difficult to determine where the branches and the roots of the respective family trees ended or began; Barb and Michael Cotter; old man Bloomfield, the former city councilman, and his nephew Regis, a tobacco lobbyist who kept rubbing his eyes and professing irritation at all the secondhand smoke; Skip Arden, doing his best John Huston as The Man from the South, in a vanilla suit hand-sewn by a Hong Kong tailor of legendary distinction; Jacob Wilson, recent heir to the Wilson fortune, who matched

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Skip in girth and verbosity, if not in taste or wit, and Jacob's bodyguard, Frank, a swarthy man in a bomber jacket who sat at the bar with Delaney and pretended inattentiveness to anything but the lone Rolling Rock beer he would order for the duration of the evening; Randy Freeman, wild-eyed behind rimless glasses and dressed way down in a wrinkled polo shirt, khaki pants, and sandals, and his lovely, staid wife, Janice; the Jenson twins down from Bellevue, Ted and Russell, who worked for Microsoft's public relations department — they were smooth as honey and slippery as eels; Jerry Premus, Wallace's hired gun in matters legal, who was twice as smooth and twice as slippery as the Jenson brothers combined; a couple of youngish unidentified women with big hair and skimpy gowns, glittering with the kind of semi-valuable jewelry Malloy's on State Avenue might rent by the evening (Wallace forgot their names on contact and figured they must be with a couple of the unattached men); and dear old Dad himself lurched from the confusion to kiss Wallace's cheek and mutter a gruff how do ye do? Wallace looked over Dalton Smith's shoulder, counting faces, and there were another half dozen that he did not recognize, and who knew if they were hangers-on or if his faculties were still utterly short-circuited? He decided to play it safe and put on his biggest movie-star grin for all concerned and bluff his way to the finish line.

Skip took charge of the event, dinging his glass of champagne to summon collective attention. He proposed a toast to Wallace's regenerative capabilities, his abundance of stalwart comrades, and his continued speedy recovery, upon which all assembled cried, "Here, here!" and drank. No one mentioned Helen. She sat amongst them, nonetheless. Wallace, ensconced at the head of the main table like a king, with his most loyal advisers, Skip and Randy, at either hand, saw her shadow in the faces that smiled too merrily and then concentrated with abject diligence on their salmon and baked potatoes in sour cream, or in the pitying expressions blocked by swiftly raised glasses of wine or the backs of hands as heads swiveled to engage neighbors in hushed conversation. Not that such clandestine tactics were necessary: Wallace's exhaustion, his entrenched apathy, precluded any intemperate outburst, and Skip's thunderous elocution mercifully drowned out the details anyway.

Wallace was fairly saturated and so nursed his drink and picked at his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

birthday prime rib and tried to appear at least a ghost of his former gregarious self. Matters were proceeding apace until the fifth or six round of drinks arrived and Mel Redfield started in on Vietnam and the encroachment of French and American factories upon traditional indigenous agrarian cultures. Wallace suddenly feared he might do something rash. He set aside his glimmering knife, grinned and told Mel to hold that thought. He lurched to his feet, miraculously without upsetting a mass of tableware and half-full glasses, and made for the restrooms farther back where it was sure to be dim and quiet. Delaney, alert as any guard dog, cocked his head and then rose to follow, and subsided at a look from Wallace.

Wallace hesitated at the men's room, limped past it and pushed through the big metal door that let into the alley. The exit landing faced a narrow, dirty street and the sooty, featureless rear wall of Gossen's Fine Furniture. A sodium lamp illuminated a Dumpster and a mound of black garbage bags piled at the bottom of the metal stairs. He sagged against the railing, fumbled out his cigarettes, got one going and smoked it almost convulsively. Restaurant noises pulsed dimly through the wall. Water dripped from the gutters and occasionally car horns echoed from blocks farther off, tires screeched and a woman laughed, high and maniacal — the mating cry of the hopelessly sloshed female.

He finished his cigarette and began another and was almost human again when someone called to him.

"Hey." The voice floated from the thicker shadows of the alley. It was a husky voice, its sex muted by the acoustics of the asphalt and concrete. "Hey, mister."

Wallace dragged on his cigarette and peered into the darkness. The muscles in his neck and shoulders bunched. His hand shook. He opened his mouth to answer that odd, muffled voice and could not speak. His throat was too tight. What did it remind him of? Something bad, something tickling the periphery of his consciousness, a warning. A certain quality of the voice, its inflection and cadence, harkened recollections of hunting for tigers in the high grass in India, of chopping like Pizarro through the Peruvian jungles on the trail of jaguars — of *being* hunted.

"Mister." The voice was close now. "I can see you. Please. *Prease.*" The last word emerged in a patently affected accent, a mockery of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Asian dialect. A low, wheezy chuckle accompanied this. "*Prease, mistuh. You put a hotel in my rice paddy, mistuh.*"

Wallace dropped his cigarette. He turned and groped for the door handle and it was slick with condensation. He pushed hard and the handle refused to budge. Locked. "Ah, sonofabitch!" He slumped against the door, face to the alley, and clutched his cane, wished like hell he had not been too lazy and vain to strap on one of his revolvers, which he never carried after the accident because the weight dragged on his shoulder. His heart lay thick and heavy. He gulped to catch his breath.

The sodium lamp dimmed. "*Mistuh Smith. Where you goin' Mistuh Smith?*" Someone stood across the way, partially hidden by the angle of the building.

Jesus Christ, what is he wearing? Wallace could not quite resolve the details because everything was mired in varying shades of black, but the figure loomed very tall and very broad and was most definitely crowned with bizarre headgear reminiscent of a miter or a witch's hat. Wallace's drunkenness and terror peeled back in an instant of horrible clarity. Here was the figure that had appeared in his fever dreams — the ghastly, robed specter haunting the grounds of his estate. The lamp flickered and snuffed and Wallace was trapped in a cold black box. He reached back and began to slap the door feebly with his left hand.

"Wally. It is *soo* nice to meet you in the flesh." The voice emanated from a spot near Wallace's foot and it was easy to imagine the flabby, deranged face of a country bumpkin grinning up between the stairs. "Are you afraid? Are you afraid, sweetheart? Don't be afraid...*boss man*. They're about to cut the cake."

Wallace slapped the door, slapped the door. It was futile as tapping the hull of a battleship. A rancid odor wafted to him — the stench of fleshy rot and blood blackening in the belly of a sluice. "W-what do you want?"

"I want to show you something beautiful."

"I'm — I'm not interested. No cash."

"Father saw you that day. What Father sees, He covets. He covets you, Wally-dear."

Wallace's stomach dropped into his shoes. "Who are you?"

The other laughed, a low, moist chuckle of unwholesome satisfaction. "Me? A sorcerer. The shade of Tommy Tune. The Devil's left hand.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One of the inheritors of the Earth." Something rattled on the steps. Fingernails, perhaps. "I am a digger of holes, an opener of doors. I am here to usher in the dark." The odor grew more pungent. Glutted intestines left to swell in greenhouse heat; a city stockyard in July. Flies droned and complained. Flies were suddenly everywhere. "He lives in the cracks, Wally. The ones that run through everything. In the cracks between yesterday and tomorrow. Crawl into the dark, and there He is, waiting...."

"Look, I — just leave me alone, okay. Okay?" Wallace brushed flies from his hair, his lips, and nose. "Don't push me, fella."

"Wifey met Him and you shall too. Everyone shall meet Him in good, sweet time. You'll scream a hymn to the black joy He brings."

Wallace lunged and thrust at the voice with his cane and struck a yielding surface. The cane was wrenched from his fingers with such violence his hand tore and bled. He stumbled and his traitorous hip gave way. He went to his knees, bruised them on the grating. Pain telescoped from his hip and stabbed his eyes — not quite the sense of broken bone, but it hurt, sweet Christ did it ever. Fingers clamped onto his wrist and yanked him flat. The hand was huge and impossibly powerful and Wallace was stuck fast, his arm stretched over the edge of the landing and to the limits of his shoulder socket, his cheek pressed against metal. The dying remnants of his cigarette smoldered several inches from his eye. Sloppy, avaricious lips opened against his palm. The tongue was clammy and large as a preposterously gravid slug and it lapped between Wallace's fingers and sucked them into a cavernous mouth.

Wallace thrashed and lowed like a cow that has been hamstrung. Teeth nicked him, might have snipped his fingers at the knuckle, he could tell from the size and sharpness of them. A great, Neolithic cannibal was making love to his hand. Then his hand slipped deeper, as the beast grunted and gulped and the mouth closed softly over his forearm, his elbow, and this couldn't be possible, no way the esophageal sheath of a monstrous throat constricted around his biceps with such force his bones creaked together, no way that he was being swallowed alive, that he was going to disappear into the belly of a giant —

The world skewed out of focus.

The door jarred open and light and music surged from the restaurant

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

interior. "Boss, they want to cut the cake...Boss! What the hell?" Delaney knelt beside him and rolled him over.

Wallace clutched his slick fingers against the breast of his suit and laughed hysterically. "I dropped my cane," he said.

"What are you doing out here?" Delaney gripped Wallace's forearms and lifted him to his feet. "You okay? Oh, jeez — you're bleeding! You break anything?"

"Needed some air...I'm fine." Wallace smiled weakly and sneaked a glance at the alley as he hurriedly wiped his face with his left sleeve. The lamp was still dead and the wedge of light from the open door did not travel far. He considered spilling his guts. Delaney would call the cops and the cops would find what? Nothing, and then they would ask to see his prescription and probably ask if he should be mixing Demerol with ten different kinds of booze. Oh, and by the way, what really happened in that barn. Go on: you can tell us. "I'm okay. Slipped is all."

Delaney leaned over the railing and peered down. "I'll go find your cane — "

"No! I, uh, busted it. Cheap wood."

"Cheap wood! Know what I shelled out for that?"

"No, really. I'm freezing. We'll get a new one tomorrow."

Delaney did not appear convinced. "It broke?"

"Yeah. C'mon, Dee. Let's go and get this party over with, huh?"

"That's the spirit, Mr. S.," Delaney steadied him and said no more, but Wallace noticed he did not remove his hand from his pocket until they were safely inside and among friends.

6.

The remainder of the evening dragged to pieces like old fearful Hector come undone behind Achilles' cart and eventually Wallace was home and unpacked from the car. He collapsed into bed and was asleep before Delaney clicked off the lights.

Wallace dreamt of making love to Helen again.

They occupied a rocky shelf above Sun Devil Stadium, screwing like animals on a scratchy Navajo blanket. It was dusk, the stadium was deserted. Helen muttered into the blanket. Wallace pulled her ponytail to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

raise her head, because he thought he heard a familiar syllable or phrase. Something guttural, something darksome. His passion cooled to a ball of pig iron in his belly. The night air grew bitter, the stars sharp.

Helen said in a metallic voice, *There is a hole no man can fill.*

Wallace flew awake and sat pop-eyed and gasping. Clock said 3:39 A.M. He got out of bed, switched on the lamp, and slumped in its bell of dull light, right hand tucked against his chest. His hand was thickly bandaged and it itched. The contours of the bedroom seemed slightly warped, window frames and doorways were too skinny and pointy. The floor was cold. The lamp bulb imploded with a sizzle that nearly stopped his heart and darkness rushed in like black water filling a muddy boot print.

He did not feel welcome.

Delaney stood in the kitchen eating a sandwich over the sink. He was stripped to the waist. "You want me to fix you one?" he asked when Wallace padded in. He lived in the old gardener's cottage, used a second key to come and go as he pleased. Wallace had contemplated asking him to move into the downstairs guestroom and decided it was too much of an imposition. Delaney had women over from the clubs; he enjoyed loud music. Best to leave him at the end of a long leash.

Wallace waved him off, awkwardly poured a glass of milk with his left hand, sloshed in some rum from an emergency bottle in a counter drawer. He held his glass with trembling fingers, eyeballing the slimy bubbles before they slid into his mouth; poured another. He leaned against the stainless steel refrigerator. The kitchen was designed for professional use — Beth had retained a chef on the payroll for a while. That was when the Smith House was the epicenter of cocktail socials and formal banquets. The Mayor and his entourage had attended on several occasions. The middleweight champion of the world. A porn star and his best girl. With people like that dropping in, you had better have a chef. Anymore, Delaney did the cooking. Delaney, king of cold cuts.

Wallace said, "How'd you get that one?" He meant the puckered welt on Delaney's ribcage.

Delaney scraped his plate in the sink, ran the tap. "I was a pretty stupid kid," he said.

"And all that's changed?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Delaney said, "Des Moines is a tough town. We were tough kids. A big crew. We caused some trouble. People got hurt."

Wallace knew about Delaney's record, his history of violence, the prisons he had toured. He knew all that in a peripheral way, but had never pried into Delaney's past, never dug up the nitty-gritty details. Guys like him, you left well enough alone. The confession did not surprise him. It was Delaney's nature and a large reason why Wallace hired him when the investment money began to attract unwanted attention. Delaney knew exactly how to deal with people who gave Wallace grief.

Delaney sat on a stool, arms crossed. He directed his gaze at the solid black window, which gave back only curved reflections of the room and its haggard occupants. "Most of us went to the pen, or died. Lots of drinking, lots of dope. Everybody carried. I got shot for the first time when I was sixteen. We knocked over this pool hall on the South End — me and Lonnie Chavez and Ruby Pharaoh. Some guy popped up and put two .32 slugs through my chest. The hospital was a no-go, so Ruby Pharaoh and Chavez loaded me in Ruby's caddy and took me to a field. Chavez's dad was an Army corpsman; he lifted some of his old man's meds and performed home surgery." The small man shook his head with a wry grin. "Hell, it was like the old Saturday matinee westerns we watched as kids — Chavez heating up his knife with a Zippo and Ruby pouring Wild Turkey all over my chest. Hurt like a sonofabitch, let me say. Chavez hid me in a chicken coop until the whole thing blew over. I was real weak, so he fed me. Changed my bandages, brought me comic books and cigs. I never had a brother."

"Me either," Wallace said. "Mine was too young and I left home before he got outta diapers. But I gotta be honest, I always thought of you as a son."

"You ain't my daddy, Mr. S. You're too rich to be my daddy. You like the young pussy, though. He did too and it caused him no end of trouble."

"That cop was by today."

"Yeah."

"He seems edgy. Seems worried."

"Yeah."

"Dee, when you came into the barn, did you see anything, I don't know, weird?" Wallace hesitated. "Besides the obvious, I mean. These

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

burns on my back; I can't figure how I got them. And what happened to the horse?"

Delaney shrugged. "What's the matter, Mr. S? Cop got you spooked too?"

"I don't need him for that." Wallace placed his glass in the sink. "What happened to the horse, Dee?"

"I blew its head off, Boss." Delaney lighted a cigarette, passed it to Wallace, fired another and smoked it between his middle and fourth fingers, palm slightly cupped to his lips. During the reign of Beth, smoking had been forbidden in the house. Didn't matter anymore.

"I want cameras in tomorrow. Get Savage over here, tell him I've seen the light," Wallace said.

"Cameras, huh."

"Look...I've seen somebody sneaking around at night. I suspected I was hallucinating and maybe that's all it is. I think one of the Choates is around."

"Dogs woulda ripped his balls off."

"I want the cameras. That's it."

"Okay. Where?"

"Where...the gate, for certain. Front door. Pool building. Back yard. We don't use the tool shed. Savage can run everything through there. Guess I'll need to hire a security guy — "

"A couple of guys."

"A couple of guys, right. Savage can take care of that too."

"It'll be a job. A few days, at least."

"Yeah? Well, sooner he gets started...."

"Okay. Is that all?"

Wallace nodded. "For now. I haven't decided. 'Night, Dee."

"'Night, Boss."

7.

Billy Savage of Savage and Sons came in before noon the following day and talked to Delaney about Wallace's latest security needs. Savage had silver, greased-down hair, a golfer's tan, and a denture-perfect smile. Wallace watched from his office window as Savage and Delaney walked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around the property. Savage took notes on a palm-sized computer while Delaney pointed at things. It took about an hour. Savage left and returned after lunch with three vans loaded with men and equipment. Delaney came into the office and gave Wallace a status report. The guys would be around for two or three days if all went according to plan. Savage had provided him a list of reliable candidates for security guards. Wallace nodded blearily. He was deep into a bottle of blue label Stoli by then. He'd told Delaney he trusted his judgment — *Hire whoever you want, Dee. Tell Cecil to leave Helen be for a while. I'm sick of that screaming.*

She's asleep, Mr. S. They doped her up last night and she's been dead to the world ever since.

Oh. Wallace rubbed his eyes and it was night again. He lolled in his leather pilot's chair and stared out at the cruel stars and the shadows of the trees. "You have to do something, Wally, old bean. You really do." He nodded solemnly and took another swig. He fumbled around in the dark for the phone and finally managed to thumb the right number on his speed dialer. Lance Pride, of the infamous Pride Agency, sounded as if he had been going a few rounds with a bottle himself. But the man sobered rather swiftly when he realized who had called him at this *god-awful* hour. "Wallace. What's wrong?"

Wallace said, "It's about the accident."

"Yeah. I thought it might be." And after nearly thirty seconds of silence, Pride said, "Exactly what do you want? Maybe we should do this in person —"

"No, no, nothing heavy," Wallace said. "Write me the book on the Choates. Forward and back."

Pride laughed bleakly and replied that would make for some unpleasant bedtime reading, but not to worry. "Are we looking at...ahem, payback?" He had visited the hospital, sent flowers, et cetera. Back in the olden days, when Wallace was between wives and Pride had only gotten started, they frequented a few of the same seedy haunts and closed down their share. Of course, if Wallace wanted satisfaction over what had happened to Helen, he need but ask. Friend discount and everything. The detective was not a strong-arm specialist per se, however he had a reputation for diligence and adaptation. Before the arrival of Delaney, Wallace had employed Pride to acquire the goods on more than one

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

recalcitrant landowner — and run off a couple that became overly vengeful. Pride was not fussy about his methods; a quality that rendered him indispensable. "I'll skin your cat, all right," was his motto.

8.

It was a busy week. On Tuesday, Doctor Green paid a visit, shined a light in his eyes and took his pulse and asked him a lot of pointed questions and wrote a prescription for sleeping pills and valium. Dr. Green wagged his finger and admonished him to return to physical therapy — Hesse, the massively thewed therapist at the Drover Clinic, had tattled regarding Wallace's spotty attendance. Wednesday, the hospital sent a private ambulance for Helen and whisked her off to her monthly neurological examination. She came home in the afternoon with a heart monitor attached to her chest. Kate told Wallace it was strictly routine, they simply wanted to collect data. She smiled a fake smile when she said it and he was grateful.

He sat with Helen for a couple of hours in the afternoons while Kate did laundry and made the bed and filled out the reams of paperwork necessary to the documentation of Helen's health care service. Helen was losing weight. There were circles beneath her vacant eyes and she smelled sick in the way an animal does when it stops eating and begins to waste from the inside. There was also the crack in her face. The original small fracture had elongated into a moist fissure. Wallace gazed in queasy fascination at the pink, crusty furrow that began at her hairline and closed her right eye and blighted her cheekbone. The doctors had no explanation for the wound or its steady encroachment. They had taken more blood and run more scans, changed some medications and increased the dosage of others and indicated in the elegant manner of professional bearers of bad tidings that it was a crap shoot.

Meanwhile, men in coveralls traipsed all over the grounds setting up alarms and cameras; Delaney interviewed a dozen or so security guard applicants from the agency Billy Savage recommended.

Wallace observed from the wings, ear glued to the phone while his subordinates in Seattle and abroad informed him about the status of his various acquisitions and investments. His team was soldiering on quite

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

adequately and he found his attention wandering to more immediate matters: securing his property from the depredations of that ghoulish figure and getting to the bottom of the Choate mystery.

Pride had the instincts of a blue ribbon bird dog and he did not disappoint Wallace's expectations. The detective only required three days to track down an eyewitness to history, one Kurt Bruenig of the Otter Creek Bruenigs.

"The Choates were unsavory, you bet." Kurt Bruenig wiped his mustache, took a long sip of ice tea. A barrel of a man, with blunt fingers, his name stitched on the breast of an oil-stained coverall. His wrecker was parked outside their window booth of the Lucky Bucket in downtown Olympia. "Nasty folk, if you must know. Why *do* you want to know, Mr. Smith?"

Wallace punched the speed dial on his cell. It rang, rang, rang. "Damn," he muttered. His head felt like a soccer ball. He cracked the seal on a packet of aspirin and stirred seltzer water in a shabby plastic drinking glass. He swallowed the aspirin, chased them with the seltzer, and held on tight while his guts seesawed into the base of his throat.

"Somethin' wrong?"

"How's your lunch?" Wallace gestured at the man's demolished fish and chips basket.

"Fine."

"Yes? How's the fat check you got in your pocket? Look, there's more in it for you, but I'm asking, and my business is mine." Wallace caught Delaney's eye at the bar, and Delaney resumed watching the Dodgers clobber the Red Sox on the big screen.

"Hey, no problem." Bruenig shrugged affably. Tow truck drivers dealt with madmen on a daily basis. "The Choates...our homestead was the next one over, butted up against Otter Creek."

"Pretty area," Wallace said. He placed a small recorder on the table and adjusted the volume. "Please speak clearly, Mr. Bruenig. You don't mind, do you?"

"Uh, no. Sure. It went to hell. Anyways, they were around before us, 'bout 1895. My great-granddaddy pitched his tent in 1910. Those old boys were cats 'n dogs from the get go. The Choates were Jews — claimed to be Jews. Had some peculiar customs that didn't sit well with my kin, what

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with my kin bein' Baptists and all. Not that my great-granddaddy was the salt of the Earth, mind you — he swindled his way into our land from what I've been told. I suppose a fair amount of chicanery watered my family tree. We come from Oklahoma and Texas, originally. Those as stayed behind got rich off of cattle and oil. Those of us as headed west, you see what we did with ourselves." He nodded at the wrecker, wiped his greasy fingers on a napkin. "My dad and his tried their hands at farmin'. Pumpkins, cabbage. Had a Christmas tree farm for a few years. Nothin' ever came of it. My sister inherited when my dad passed away. She decided it wasn't worth much, sold out to an East Coast fella. Same as bought the Choate place. But the Choates, they packed it in first. Back in '83 — right after their house burned down. We heard one of 'em got drunk and knocked over a lantern. Only thing survived was the barn. Like us, there weren't many of them around at the end. Morgan, he was the eldest. His kids, Hank and Carlotta — they were middle-aged, dead now. Didn't see 'em much. Then there was Josh and Tyler. I was in school with those two. Big, big boys. They played line on a couple football teams that took state."

"How big would you say they were?" Wallace asked.

"Aw, that's hard to say. Josh, he was the older one, the biggest. Damned near seven foot tall. And thick — pig farmers. I remember bumpin' into Josh at the fillin' station, probably four years outta high school. He was a monster. I saw him load a fifty-five-gallon drum into the back of his flatbed. Hugged it to his chest and dropped it on the tailgate like nothin'. He moved out to the Midwest, somewhere. Lost his job when the brewery went tits-up. Tyler, he's doin' a hard stretch in Walla Walla. Used to be a deputy in the Thurston County Sheriff's department. Got nailed for accessory to murder and child pornography. You remember that brouhaha about the ring of devil worshippers supposed to operate all over Olympia and Centralia? They say a quarter of the department was involved, though most of it got hushed by the powers that be. He was one of those unlucky assholes they let dangle in the wind."

Wallace hadn't paid much attention to that scandal. In those days he had been in the throes of empire building and messy divorces. He said, "That's what you meant by nasty folk?"

"I mean they were dirty. Not dirt under the nails from honest labor, either. I'm talkin' 'bout sour-piss and blood and old grotty shit on their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

coveralls. Josh and Tyler came to school smellin' half dead, like they'd slaughtered pigs over the weekend and not bothered to change. Nobody wanted to handle their filthy money when they paid down to the feed store. As for the devil worshipping, maybe it's true, maybe not. The Satanist rap was sort of the cherry on top, you might say. The family patriarch, Kaleb Choate, was a scientist, graduated from a university in Europe. It was a big deal in the 1890s and people in these parts were leery on account of that. A Jew *and* a scientist? That was askin' a bit much. He worked with Tesla — y'know, the Tesla Coil guy. My understanding is Tesla brought him to America to work in his laboratory and didn't cotton to him and they had a fallin' out, but I dunno much about all that. One more weird fact, y'know? Wasn't long before rumors were circulatin' 'bout how old man Choate was robbin' crypts down to the Oddfellows Cemetery and performin' unnatural experiments on farm animals and Chinamen. We had a whole community of those Chinese and they weren't popular, so nobody got too riled if one turned up missin', or what-have-you. And a bunch of 'em did disappear. Authorities claimed they moved to Seattle and Tacoma where the big Chinese communities were, or that they sailed back to China and just forgot to tell anybody, or that they ran off and got themselves killed trespassing. Still, there were rumors, and by the time my great-granddaddy arrived, Kaleb Choate's farm was considered off limits for good honest Christians. 'Course there was more. Some people took it into their heads that Choate was a wizard or a warlock, that he came from a long line of black magicians. There were a few, like the Teagues on Waddel Creek and the Bakkers over to the eastern Knob Hills, who swore he could mesmerize a fella by lookin' into his eyes, that he could fly, that he fed those Chinamen to demons in return for...well, there it kinda falls apart. The Choates had land and that was about it. They were dirt poor when I was a kid — sorta fallen into ruin, y'might say. If Old Poger made a bargain with 'em, then they got royally screwed from the looks of it. I wonder 'bout the flyin' part on account of my sister and her boyfriend, Wooly Clark, claimed Josh could levitate like those yogis in the Far East, swore to Jesus they saw him do it in the woods behind the school once when they were necking. But hell, I dunno. My sister, she's a little soft in the brain, so there's no tellin' what she did or didn't see....

"Anyhow, the Bruenigs and the Choates had this sort of simmerin'

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

feud through the years — Kaleb kicked the bucket in the forties, but our families kept fightin'. Property squabbles, mainly. Their pigs caused some problems, came onto our land and destroyed my grandma's garden more than once. The kids on both sides liked to cause trouble, beat hell out of each other whenever they could. I guess the grown men pulled that too. My uncles got in a brawl with some of the Choates at the Lucky Badger; all of 'em were eighty-six'd for life and Uncle Clover did a month in the county lockup for bustin' a guy over the noggin with a chair."

Wallace said, "So, did you ever notice anything unusual going on?"

"You mean, like was the deal with Tyler an isolated incident or were the old rumors all true? Maybe we had a bona fide witch coven next door?" Bruenig shook his head. "There were some strange happenin's, I'll grant. More complicated than witches, though."

"Complicated?"

'That's right, partner. Look at the history, you'll notice a few of the Choates were eggheads. Heck of a deal to be an egghead yet spend your whole life on a farm, isn't it? Buncha friggin' cloistered monks — unnatural. You had Kaleb's son, Morgan, he owned the land until they sold out and he was a recluse, nobody ever saw him, but I heard tell he was an astronomer, wrote a book or somethin'. Then you got Paul Choate — Dr. Creepy, the kids called him; he taught physics at Evergreen in the seventies and did some research for NASA. But he wasn't even the smartest of the litter. We knew at least three more of those guys coulda done the same. Hell, Josh was a genius in school. He just hated class; bored him. Me, I always thought they were contacted by aliens. That's why they all acted so weird."

"You're shitting me," Wallace said.

"No, sir. You gonna sit there and tell me you don't believe in the ETs? This is the twenty-first century, pal. You oughta read Carl Sagan."

"You read Carl Sagan?"

"'Cause I drive a wrecker I'm a dumbass? Read Sagan, there's plenty of funky stuff goin' on in the universe."

"Okay, okay," Wallace said. "Tell me about the aliens."

"Like I said, it goes all the way back to the beginnin', if you pay attention. Within a decade of Kaleb Choate's arrival, folks started reportin' peculiar sightin's. Goat men in the Waddel Creek area, two-headed calves,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lights over the Capitol Forest — no airplanes to explain that away. Not then. People saw UFOs floatin' around the Choate fields month after month in 1915 and 1916, right when the action in Europe was gettin' heavy. Some of it's in the papers, some it was recorded by the police department and private citizens, the library. It's a puzzle. You find a piece here and there, pretty quick things take shape. Anyhow, this went on into the fifties and sixties, but by then the entire country was in the middle of the saucer scare, so the authorities assumed mass hysteria. There were still disappearances too, except now it wasn't the Chinese — the Chinese had moseyed to greener pastures by the late forties. Nope, this was mostly run of the mill, God fearin' townies. Don't get me wrong, we aren't talking 'bout bus loads. Three or four kids, a couple wives, a game warden and a census taker, some campers. More than our share of bums dropped off the face of the Earth, but you know that didn't amount to a hill of beans. These disappearances are spread thin. Like somebody, or somethin', was bein' damn careful not to rouse the natives.

"Of course, as a kid I was all-fired curious 'bout morbid crap, pestered my dad constantly. I pried a little out of him; more I learned Hardy Boys style. Got to tell you, my daddy wouldn't talk 'bout the Choates if he could help it; he'd spit when someone mentioned 'em. Me and my sister got ambitious and dug into the dirty laundry. We even spied on 'em. Mighty funny how often they used to get visitors from town. Rich folks. Suits from the Capitol drove out there. Real odd, considerin' the Choates have always been looked down on as white trash — homegrown eggheads or not. That's what got me thinkin'. That and I saw Morgan and his boys diggin' in their fields at night."

"Mass graves?" Wallace said dryly.

Bruenig barked a wad of phlegm into his basket. "Huh! Better believe it crossed my mind. Told my pappy and his eyes got hard. Seems Granddad saw 'em doin' the same thing in *his* day. Near as we could tell they were laying pipe or cable, all across their property. They owned about three thousand acres, so there's miles of it, whatever it is. Then there were the pylons — "

"Pylons. Where'd you see those?" Wallace's interest sharpened.

"Farther back on their land. Long time ago a road wound around there — it's overgrown now, but when it was cleared there were these rocks

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sittin' out in the middle of nowhere. Sorta like that Stonehenge deal, except it was just one or two in each field. Jesse, my sister, counted twenty of 'em scattered 'round. She said they looked like peckers, and I have to admit they did bear a resemblance."

"Any idea who made them?"

"Nah. I mentioned it to a young geologist fella, worked for the BLM. He got interested, said he was gonna interview the Choates, see if they'd built on tribal grounds. Never heard from him again, though. He was barkin' up the wrong tree anyway. Those rocks are huge: least two tons each. How the Indians supposed to move that kinda load? Otter Creek — puhlease. Not in your lifetime. Plus, I never seen rock looked like those pylons. We don't have obsidian 'round here. Naw, those things are ancient and the ETs shipped 'em in from somewhere else. Probably markers, like pyramids and crop circles. Then the Choates come along and use 'em to communicate with the aliens. Help 'em with their cattle mutilations and their abductions. Don't ask me why the aliens need accomplices. No way we'll ever understand what makes a Gray tick."

Wallace turned off the recorder, slipped it in his pocket. "Is that all, Mr. Bruenig? Anything else you want to add that I might find useful?"

"Well, sir, I reckon I don't truly know what that could be. My advice is to steer clear of the Choate place, if you're thinkin' of muckin' 'round that way. You aren't gonna find any arrowheads or souvenirs worth your time. Don't know that I hold with curses, but that land's got a shadow over it. I sure as hell don't poke my nose around there."

9.

Wallace's favorite was the dead woman on the rocker.

Beth had hated it, said the artist, a local celebrity named Miranda Carson, used too much wax. The sculpture was indeed heavy; it required two burly movers to install it in the gallery. Wallace did not care, he took morbid pleasure in admiring the milky eyes, the tangled strands of real hair the artist collected from her combs. In low light, the wax figure animated, transformed into a young woman, knees drawn to chin, meditating upon the woods behind the house, the peacocks and the other things that lurked. Wallace once loaned the piece, entitled *Remembrance*, to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

UW library; brought it home after an earthquake shattered an arm and damaged the torso. Carson had even driven over and performed a hasty repair job. The cracks were still evident, like scars. Macabre and beautiful.

The gallery was populated by a dozen other sculptures, a menagerie orphaned by Beth's departure and Wallace's general disinterest. Wallace wandered among them, cell phone glued to his ear, partially aware of Skip's buzzing baritone. Wallace thought the split in the dead girl's body seemed deeper. More jagged.

" — so Randy and I'll go today. Unless you want to come. Might be what you need."

"Say again?" Wallace allowed himself to be drawn into the cathode. It dawned on him that he had made a serious tactical error in confiding the Bruenig interview to Skip. They had discussed the Choate legend over drinks the prior evening and Wallace more than half expected his friend to laugh, shake his snowy head and call him a damn fool for chasing his tail. Instead, Skip had kept mum and sat stroking his beard with a grim, thoughtful expression. Now, after a night's sleep, the story had gestated and hatched as a rather dubious scheme to nip Wallace's anxieties at their roots.

"Randy and I'll scope out that property this afternoon. He wants to see that nest you were going on about at the hospital. He said it sounds weird. I told him it's dried up. He refuses to listen, of course."

"Wait-wait." Wallace rubbed his temple. "You plan to go to the barn."

"Uh-hmm, right."

"To what — look at the nest?"

"That's what I've been saying. I'm thinking noon, one o'clock. We'll have dinner at the Oyster House. It's lobster night."

"Lobster night, yeah. Skip?"

"What?"

"Forget about the nest. You're right, it won't be there, they migrate, I think. And the barn's condemnable, man. It's dangerous. Scary people hang around — maybe druggies, I dunno. Bad types." Wallace's hand was slippery. He was afraid he might drop the phone.

"Oh yeah? Well it just so happens I called Lyle Ferguson — your old pal Lyle, remember him? He landed the bid and he says they're planning to commence tearing down the barn and all that sort of thing on Monday or Tuesday. So time is of the essence, as they say."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Skip — "

"Hey, Wally. I'm driving here. You don't want to come with us?" Skip's voice crackled.

"No. Uh, say hi to Fergie, if you see him."

"Okay, buddy. I'm driving, I gotta go. Call you tomorrow." Click.

"Uh, huh." Wallace regarded a bust on a plinth. It was the half-finished head of a woman wearing thick lipstick. A crack had begun to divide the plaster face.

He had had Pride check into Bruenig's story about the BLM geologist and the monoliths. The geologist was named Chuck Doolittle and he abruptly quit his post six years ago, dropped everything and departed the state of Washington, although nobody at the department had a handle on where he might have emigrated. As for the so-called monoliths, the bureau disavowed knowledge of any such structures, and while the former Choate property did overlap tribal grounds, it had long ago been legally ceded to the county. No mystery at all.

The only hitch, insomuch as Pride was concerned, was the fact certain records pertaining to the Choate farm were missing from the county clerk's office. According to a truncated file index, the Choate folder once contained numerous photos of unidentified geological formations, or possibly manmade constructs of unknown origin. The series began in 1927, the latter photographs being dated as late as 1971. Pride located eight black-and-white pictures taken in 1954 through 1959 that displayed some boulders and indistinct earth heaves akin to the Mima Mounds. Unfortunately, the remainder of the series, some ninety-eight photos, was missing and unaccounted for since an office fire at the old courthouse in '79.

Wallace went into Helen's suite, waited near the door while Cecil massaged Helen's cramped thigh muscles. Kate had arrived early. The burly nurse dabbed Helen's brow with a washcloth and murmured encouragement. Helen's fish-black eyes rolled with blindness and fear. There was nothing of comprehension or sanity in them, and the cleft in her forehead and cheek was livid as a gangrenous brand. She howled and howled without inflection, the flat repeating utterance of an institutionalized mind.

Wallace limped upstairs to his office, turned up the radio. His hip

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

throbbed fiercely — sympathy pangs. His hand itched with fading scabs. What had happened to him that night in the alley behind the Marlin? What was happening now? He found some Quaaludes in a drawer, chased them with a healthy belt of JD, and put his head down in his arms, a kindergartner again.

10.

Wallace was standing in Skip's dining room. Wallace's feet were nailed down with railroad spikes.

"Why'd you let them go?" Delaney asked. Delaney slouched against a cabinet, smoking.

Watery light washed out the details. Randy's prosthesis shone upon the table, plastic fingers blooming in a vase. A two-inch crack separated the fancy tiled ceiling. There was movement inside. Squirming.

Skip swaggered from the kitchen and plunged oversized hands into a bowl of limp, yellow noodles. He drew forth a clump, steaming and dripping, plopped it on his head as a wig. Grinned the wacky grin of a five-year-old stoned out of his gourd on cough syrup.

"Why are you doing that?" Wallace tried to modulate his voice; his voice was scratchy, was traitorously shrill.

Skip drooled and capered, shook fistfuls of noodles like pom-poms.

Wallace said, "Where's Randy? Skip, is Randy here?"

"Nope."

"Where is he?"

"With the god of the barn-b-barn — b-barn barn barn barn!"

"Skip, where's Randy?"

"In the barn with Bay-el, Bay-el, Bay-el. Playing a game." Skip hummed a ditty to his noodles, cast Wallace a sidelong glance of infinite slyness. "Snufalupagus LOVES raw spaghetti. No sauce, no way! I pretend it's worms. Worms get big, Wallace. You wouldn't believe how big some worms get. Worms crawl inside your guts and make babies. They crawl up your nose, your ears, into your mouth. If somebody grinds you into itty-bitty pieces and a worm eats you, it'll know all the stuff you did." He lowered his voice. "They can crawl up your butt and make ya do the hula dance and jabber like Margie Thatcher on crank!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Where's Randy?"

"Playing sock puppets." Skip began ramming noodles down his throat. "He's Kermit de Frog!"

"Should've stopped them, Boss. Now they've stirred up the wasps' nest. You're fucked." Delaney stubbed his cigarette and walked through the wall.

Wallace awoke in darkness, fearful and disoriented. He had drunkenly migrated to his bedroom at some fuzzy period and burrowed into the covers. He remembered long, narrow corridors, bloody nebulas splattered against leaded glass, and kirlian figures scorched into the walls: skeletal fragments of clawing hands and gaping mouths.

Wallace, Helen said. She was there with him in the room, wedged high in the corner of the walls where they joined the ceiling. She gleamed white as bone and her eyes and mouth and the crack in her face were black as the pits between the stars. *There's a hole you can't fill*, she said.

Wallace screamed in his throat, a mangled, pathetic cry. The clouds moved across the moon and reshaped the shadows on the wall and Helen was not hanging there with her black black eyes, her covetous mouth, or the stygian worm that fed on her face. There were only moonbeams and the reflections of branches like skinned fingers against the plaster.

Wallace lay trembling. Eventually he drifted away and slept with the covers over his head. He flinched at the chorus of night sounds, each knock upon the door.

11.

"Skip. Are you eating? Where've you been?"

"Nothing, Wallace. I'm tired."

"Skip, it's three. I've been calling for hours. Why don't you come over."

"Ahh, no thanks. I'm gonna sleep a while. I'm tired."

"Skip."

"Yeah?"

"Where's Randy? He doesn't answer his phone."

"Dunno. Try him at the office. Little bastard's always working late."

"I tried his office, Skip."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Okay. That's right. He's out of town. On business."
"Business. What kind of business?"
"Dunno. Business."
"Where did he go, exactly? Skip? Skip, you still there?"
"Dunno. He won't be around much, I guess. There's a lot of business."
"Skip — "
"Wallace, I gotta sleep, now. Talk to you later. I'm very tired."

12.

Wallace sat on the steps, new cane across his knees, Bruno and Thor poised at his flanks like statuary come alive. The sun bled red and gold. The trees would be getting green buds any day now. He listened to the birds mating in the branches. The graveyard-shift security guard, a gray, melancholy fellow named Tom, was going off-duty. He came over to smoke a cigarette and introduce himself to his new boss. He was a talker, this dour, gaunt Tom. He used to drive school buses until his back went south — lower lumbar was a killer, yessiree. He was an expert security technician. Twenty-four years on the job; he had seen everything. The other two guys, Charlie and Dante, were kids, according to Tom. He promised to keep an eye on them for Wallace, make certain they were up to standard. Wallace said thanks and asked Tom to bring him the nightly surveillance video. The guard asked if he meant all four of them and Wallace considered that a moment before deciding, no, only the video feed from the garden area. Tom fetched it from the guard shack and handed it over without comment. The look on his face sufficed — he was working for a lunatic.

Wallace plugged the CD into the player on his theater-sized plasma television in the den. He called Randy's house and talked to Janice while silent, grainy night images flickered on the screen. Janice said Randy had left a cryptic message on the answering machine and nothing since. He had rambled about taking a trip and signed off by yelling, *Hallucigenia! Hallucigenia sparsa! It's a piece of something bigger — waaay bigger, honey!* Janice was unhappy. Randy had pulled crazy stunts before. He dodged lengthy stays in Federal penitentiaries as a college student and she had been there for the entire, wild ride. She expected the phone to ring at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

any moment and him to be in prison, or a hospital. What if he tried to sneak into Cuba again? What if he blew off his other hand? Who was going to wipe his ass then? Wallace reassured her that nothing of the sort was going to happen and made her promise to call when she heard anything.

Lance Pride dropped in to report his progress. Pride was lanky, a one-time NBA benchwarmer back in the seventies. He dressed in stale tweeds and emanated a palpable sense of repressed viciousness. His eyes were hard and small. He glanced at the video on the television and did not comment.

Pride confessed Joshua Choate appeared to be a dead end. His last known residence was a trailer court on the West Side of Olympia and he had abandoned the premises about three years ago. The former Ph.D. farm boy had not applied for a driver's license, a credit card, a job application, or anything else. Maybe he was living on the street somewhere, maybe he had skipped the country, maybe he was dead. Nobody had seen him lately, of that much Pride was certain.

Pride strewed a bundle of newspaper clippings on the coffee table, artifacts he had unearthed pertaining to Paul, Tyler, and Josh: stories detailing the promotion of Tyler Choate and a file picture of the young deputy sheriff grinning as he loomed near a Thurston County police cruiser, and another of him shackled and bracketed by guards after he had been exposed as a mastermind cultist; a shot of Joshua when he had been selected as an All-American tackle — his wide, flabby face was nearly identical to his brother's; articles from the mid-sixties following Paul Choate's hiring at the newly founded Evergreen State College and his brief and largely undocumented collaboration with NASA regarding cosmic microwave background radiation. There were school records for Tyler and Josh — four-point-oh students and standout football players. Major universities had courted them with every brand of scholarship. Tyler did his time at Washington State, majored in psychology, perfect grades, but no sports, and joined the sheriff's department. Meanwhile, Josh earned a degree in physics at Northwestern, advanced degrees in theoretical physics from Caltech and MIT, and then dropped off the radar forever. Tyler eventually became implicated in a never-fully-explained scandal involving Satanism and rape and got dropped in a deep, dark hole. The only other curious detail regarding the younger brothers was the fact both of them

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had been banned from every casino within two hundred miles of Olympia. None of the joints ever caught them cheating, but they were unstoppable at the blackjack tables, and the houses became convinced the boys counted cards.

None of it seemed too useful and Wallace barely skimmed the surface items before conceding defeat and shoving the pile aside. Pride just smiled dryly and said he'd make another pass at things. He had a lead on the company that had sold the Choates a ton of fabricated metals in the sixties and seventies. Unfortunately the company had gone under, but he was looking into former employees. He told Wallace to hang onto the newspaper clippings and left with a promise to check in soon.

Wallace moped around the house, mixing his vodka with lots of orange juice in a feeble genuflection toward sobriety. He picked up the newspaper photo of Josh Choate aged seventeen, in profile with his shoulder pads on. He wore a slight smile, and his pixelated eye was inscrutable. *I am a loyal son. I am here to usher in the dark.*

The day was bright and hot like it often was in Western Washington during the spring. The garden filled the television with static gloom. Upstairs, Helen began to scream. Wallace was out of orange juice.

He called Lyle Ferguson. The contractor was cordial as ever. He was moving crews into the Otter Creek Housing Development, AKA: the old Choate place as of that morning. Yeah, Skip Arden had called him, sure; asked whether he could nose around the property. No problem, Ferguson had said, just don't trip and break anything. Pylons? Oh, yeah, they found some rocks on the site. Nothing a bulldozer couldn't handle....

13.

The next day Wallace became impatient and had Delaney drive him to the branch office of Fish and Wildlife. Short visit. Randy Freeman's supervisor told Wallace that Randy had two months' vacation saved. The lady thought perhaps he had gone to Canada. Next, he phoned the number Detective Adams gave him and got the answering machine. He hit the number for the front desk and was told Detective Adams was on sick leave — would he care to leave a message or talk to another officer?

Wallace sat in the rear of the Bentley, forehead pressed against the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

glass as they waited in traffic beside Sylvester Park. Two lean, sun-dried prostitutes washed each other's hair in the public drinking fountain. Nearby, beat cops with faces the shade of raw flank steak loomed over a shirtless man sprawled in the grass. The man laughed and flipped the cops off and a pug dog yapped raucously at the end of a rope tied to the man's belt.

Delaney chewed on a toothpick. He said, "Boss, where are we going with this?"

Wallace shrugged and wiped his face, his neck. His thoughts were shrill and inchoate.

"Well, I don't think it's a good idea," Delaney said.

"You should've kept feeding me my pills. Then we wouldn't be sitting here."

"You need to see a shrink. This is what they call the grieving process."

"Think I'm in the denial stage?"

"I don't know what stage to call it. You aren't doing so hot. You're running in circles." The car moved again. Delaney drove with the window rolled down, his arm on the frame. "Your wife isn't going to recover. It's a bitch and it hurts, I know. But she isn't going to come around, Mr. S. She won't ever be the woman you married. And you got to face that fact, look it dead in the eye. 'Cause, till you do, whatever screws are rattling loose in your head are going to keep on rattling." He glanced over at Wallace. "I'm sorry to say that. I'm real sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Wallace smiled, thin and sad. "Just stick with me if you can. I'll talk to that Swedish psychiatrist Green recommended. Ha, I've been ducking that guy since I got out of the hospital. I'll do that, but there's something else. I have to find out what the Choates were doing on that property."

"Pit bull, aren't you, Boss?" There was admiration mixed with the melancholy.

"Bruenig said the man moved out of state. He's wrong. Choate's in the neighborhood. Maybe he lives here, maybe he's visiting, hiding under a bridge. Whatever. I saw his tracks at the barn and I think he's been creeping around the garden. I told you." *Saw him in the alley, too, didn't you, Wally*? He shuddered at the recollection of that febrile mouth closing on him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yup, you saw tracks. Almost a year ago," Delaney said. "If they were even his."

"Trust me, they were. Pride's running skips on him, although I'm getting the feeling this fellow isn't the type who's easy to find. That's why I've got Pride tracking down whoever sold the Choates the materials for their projects in the back forty. Maybe you can call in a favor with the Marconi boys, or Cortez, see if you can't turn up some names. I gotta know."

"Maybe you don't wanna know."

"Dee...something's wrong. People are dying."

Delaney looked at him in the rearview mirror.

"You better believe it," Wallace said. "Stop acting like my wet nurse, damn it."

Delaney stared straight ahead. "Okay," he said.

"Thank you," Wallace said, slightly ashamed. He lighted a cigarette as a distraction.

They went to Skip's home, idled at the gate. Delaney leaned out and pressed on the buzzer until, finally, a butler emerged with apologies from the master of the house. The servant, a rigid, ramrod of a bloke, doubtless imported directly from the finest Hampton school of butlery, requested that they vacate the premises at once. Wallace waited until the butler was inside. He hurled a brandy flask Skip gave him some birthday past, watched with sullen pleasure as it punched a hole through a parlor window. Delaney laughed in amazement, shoved Wallace into the car, left rubber smoking on the breeze.

14.

Wallace and Delaney were sitting in the study playing cards and eating a dinner of tuna fish sandwiches and Guinness when Lyle Ferguson called to say the barn had been razed. Ferguson hoped Helen would be more at peace. There was an awkward silence and then the men exchanged meaningless pleasantries and hung up.

"It's done," Wallace said. He drank the last of his beer and set the dead soldier near its mates.

Delaney dragged on his cigarette and tossed his cards down. He said, "Thing is, no matter how much you cut, cancer always comes back."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wallace chose not to acknowledge that. "Next week, I'll hunt for the rest of those pylons, the ones in the woods, and take a jackhammer to them. I'll dynamite them if it comes to that."

"Not big on respecting cultural artifacts, are we?"

"I have a sneaking suspicion that it's better for us whatever culture they belong to is dead and in the ground." Wallace missed his little brother. The kid was an ace; he would have known what was what with Bruenig's story, the crazy altar in the barn, the pylons.

"I saw Janice yesterday. She's losing her marbles. Randy was supposed to take her and the kids to Yellowstone for spring vacation. She called the cops."

"I have two postcards from him." What Wallace didn't say was that there was something strange about the cards. They were unstamped, for one. And they seemed too old, somehow, their picturesque photographs of Mount Rainier and the Mima Mounds yellowing at the edges, as if they'd lingered on a gift shop rack for decades. Which, in fact, made sense when he checked the photo copyrights and saw the dates 1958 and 1971.

"Sure you do." Delaney dropped his butt into an empty bottle, pulled another cigarette from behind his ear and lighted it. His eyes were bloodshot. "Hate to admit it...but I was a little stoned that day. When everything happened. Nothing major — I wasn't impaired, I mean."

"Hey, it doesn't matter. I'm not going to bust your chops over something stupid like that."

"No. It's important. I wasn't totally fucked up, but I don't completely trust my recollections either. Not *completely*."

"What're you talking about?"

"I pulled you out of the barn first. Then I ran in for Mrs. S. You're not supposed to move a person with injuries. Know why I moved her?"

Wallace's mouth was full of sand. He shook his head.

"Because it took the horse, Mr. S. The horse was already trussed like a fly in a spiderweb and hanging. I still see its hooves twitching. I didn't look too close. Figured I wouldn't have the balls to go under there and grab your wife." Delaney's mouth turned down. "That wasp nest of yours...it had a face," he said and looked away. "An old man's face."

"Dee — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Randy was an okay dude. He deserves a pyre. You gonna deal, or what?"

15.

Night seeped down. It rained. The power came and went, stuttered in the wires. Wallace picked up on the second ring. The caller ID said, UNKNOWN NAME–UNKNOWN NUMBER.

"Hi, Wally. Your friend is right." The mouth on the other end was too close to the receiver, was full, sensual, and malicious.

Wallace's face stiffened. "Josh?"

"Cancer always returns because time is a ring. And a ring...well, that's just a piece of metal around a hole." A wave of crackling interference drowned the connection.

"Josh!" No answer; only low, angry static.

The LED said, THEREISAHOLENOMANCANFILLTHEREISAHOLENOMANCANFILLTHEREISAHOLENOMANCANFILL. Then nothing.

16.

Friday morning, Charlie, the dayshift security guard, brought Wallace a densely wrapped parcel from Lance Pride. The shipping address was a small town in Eastern Washington called Drummond and it had been written in a thin, backward slanting style that Wallace didn't recognize.

Wallace cut the package open and found a tape cassette and a battered shoebox jammed with musty papers — personal correspondence from the appearance. It bothered him, this delivery from Pride. Why not in person? Why not a phone call, at least? Goosebumps covered his arms.

Wallace retreated to his office. He made a drink and sat at his desk near the window that looked across the manicured lawn, the sleeping garden, and far out into the woods. He finished his drink without tasting it and fixed another and drank that too. Then he filled his glass again, no ice this time, no frills, and put the tape in the machine and pressed the button. The wall above his desk shifted from red to maroon and a chill breeze fluttered drapes. The afternoon light slid toward the edge of the Earth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

After seconds of static and muffled curses, Pride cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Wallace, hi. This is Wednesday evening and...where am I. Uh, I'm at the Lone Tree Motel outside of Drummond on Highway 32 and I recently finished interviewing Tyler Choate. It's about two in the A.M. and I haven't slept since I dunno, so cut me slack if this starts to drag. The guards confiscated my tape recorder at the door, but Tyler gave me a notepad so I could write it down for later. He wanted to be certain you got your money's worth...I'll try to hit the highlights as best I can. Bear with me....

"Okay, I went looking for the manufacturer that might've sold the Choates aluminum tubes, pipes or what have you. I called some people, did some digging, and came up with a name — Elijah Salter. Salter was a marine, vet of the Korean War; rode with the cavalry as a gunner and engineering specialist — survived Operation Mousetrap and had the Bronze Star and Ike's signature to prove it. This leatherneck Bronze Star-winner came home after the war, started a nice family and went back to school where he discovered he was a real whizbang mechanical engineer. He graduated and signed on with a metal fabrication plant over in Poulsbo. Calaban Industries. This plant makes all kinds of interesting stuff, mostly for aerospace companies and a certain East Coast college that was rigging a twenty-mile-long atom-smasher — more on that later.

"Well, old Sergeant Salter climbed the ladder to plant manager, got the keys to the executive washroom, the Club Med package, free dental. They gave him plenty of slack and he jumped at it, opened a sideline with his own special clientele — among these, the Choates. Struck me as a tad eerie, this overseer of a high tech company keeping a group of hicks in his black book, and I decided to run it to ground. Wasn't tough to track Salter, he'd retired in '84, renovated a villa near here. I kid you not, a dyed-in-the-wool Spanish villa like where Imperial era nobility cooled their heels. I couldn't believe my ex-jarhead could afford a spread that posh — guy had palm trees, marble fountains, you name it. You woulda been jealous. Tell you what: his sidelines musta been lucrative.

"Made it big, made it real big, and after Salter got over the shock of meeting me in his den with my revolver pointed at his gut, he offered me a scotch and soda and praised Kaleb Choate to the heavens. Claimed not to know any of the rest of the clan that was still alive. Oh, he knew *of*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

them, he'd corresponded with Paul Choate occasionally, but they hadn't ever met in person or anything like that. I didn't get it — Kaleb's been in the ground since 1947, but what the hell.

"The sergeant had gone soft, the way a lion in a cage goes soft — he still had that bloody gleam in his eye when he gestured at the house and said his patrons took care of their own.

"Patrons? The way it slithered out of his mouth, way he sneered when he said it, didn't make me too comfortable. Also, when he's bragging about all the wonderful things these patrons did for him, I noticed a painting hanging over the piano. Damned thing was so dark it was almost black and that's why it took me a while to make out it wasn't actually a portrait, it was a picture of a demon. Or something. Guy in a suit like muckety-mucks wore in the Roaring Twenties, but his head was sort of, well, deformed, I guess is the best way to put it. Like I said, though, the oil was so dark I couldn't quite figure what I was seeing — just that it reminded me of a beehive sittin' on a man's neck. That, and the hands were about as long as my forearm. Reminded me of spooky stories my granny used to tell about Australia during the Depression. The aborigines have this legend about desert spirits called the Mimis. The Mimis are so thin they turn sideways and slip through a crack in the wall. They grab snotty kids, drag 'em underground. Don't know why I thought of that — maybe the long, snaky hands rang a bell. Granny used to scare the holy shit outta us kids with her campfire tales.

"Now I'm studying Salter's décor a bit more closely and, yep, he's got funky Gothic crap going on everywhere. Salter goes, sure, ya, ya betcha, we laid some aluminum cables on the Choate property; set up a few other gadgets too — but these projects were simply improvements on systems that had been in place for decades. I asked him what the idea was behind these cables, and he titters something about flytraps and keyholes. Kaleb Choate had been investigating alternate forms of energy and that's why he buried pipes and wires everywhere; he was building a superconductor, although his version was different, a breakthrough because it operated at high temperature. He used it to develop a whole bunch of toys. Salter used the word *squid* to describe them, except I don't think that's quite right either. Here it is — superconducting quantum interference device. SQUID, that's cute, huh. Oh, yeah...about the weird rocks you saw. Those pylons

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scattered around the area have been there for thousands of years. Some ancient tribe set 'em up to achieve a prehistoric version of Kaleb's machine, kinda like the Pyramids were before their time. Those rocks are highly radioactive — but Salter said the radiation is of unknown origin, something today's science boys haven't classified, even.

"Said if I want to know the *dirty details*, I should speak with the Choate brothers. I didn't appreciate that answer much, so I bopped him around. He starts babbling at me in a foreign language — dunno *what* language, probably Korean, but it made my skin prickle — this old savage on his belly by the pool, grinning and yammering and leaking from his nose. Then Salter just stops all of a sudden and stares at me and he's obviously disgusted. I got a gun on him, I ain't afraid to hurt him a little or a lot, and here he is shaking his head as if I'm some brat who's shat his diaper at a dinner party. He says he hopes I live so long as to bear witness and join the great revelry. Says my skin will fly from a flagpole. And all the pistol-whipping in the world wouldn't encourage him to say anything else. Not in English, anyhow. I ransacked his house, found a shoebox of letters and postcards from P., M., and T. Choate to Salter dated 1967 through 2002, and there were some drawings of things the Choates were building; blueprints.... Oh, and I swiped a rolodex chock full of interesting names. Creepy bastard had the Lieutenant Governor's home number, I kid you not. Guy's handwriting was goddamned sloppy, but I spotted one for Tyler Choate, the ex-sheriff's deputy. I decided Salter was right — best to have a chat with Tyler, get it straight from the source.

"Choate was my only choice. According to the records, Tyler and Joshua were the last of the breed, discounting obscure family branches, illegitimate kids, and so on. Since I'd been striking out with Josh, and Tyler's doing twenty to life in the state pen, I went the easy route.

"Tyler's not at Walla Walla anymore; there'd been some razzle-dazzle with the paperwork and he got transferred north to a max security facility. Place called Station 3, between Lind and Marengo on the Rattlesnake Flat.

"Choate surprised me. Friendly. Real damned friendly. Strange accent; spoke very distinctly, as if he were a 'right proper' gentleman, not a con nabbed for assorted nastiness. In fact, I got the impression he was eager for my visit. Lonely. Didn't care what I was after, either. I gave him a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cockamamie story, naturally, but I needn't have bothered. Sonofabitch was rubbing his hands together over the phone.

"It was a date. Long drive and I hate going east. Once you climb over the mountains it's nothing but wheat fields, desert, and blowing dust. This Station 3 was on the outskirts of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. It sat at the end of a dirt road in the middle of a prairie. The earth is black in those parts; salt deposits. Humongous black rocks and pine trees scattered around. Coyotes, jackrabbits, and rattlesnakes.

"I went by an Indian reservation; heard there's a pretty nice casino, but I didn't check. The Station itself was depressing — a bunch of crappy concrete houses inside a storm fence with rusty rolls of barbwire on top. Some buses were parked near the loading docks, the kind that are painted gray and black with mesh on the windows, said FRANKLIN COUNTY CORRECTIONS in big letters. A reject military base is how it looked.

"Way, way out in a field men were hoeing rows in biblical tradition; seems the prison industry, such as it is, revolves around selling potatoes and carrots to the local tribe. A dozen cons in jumpsuits milled in the yard, pulling weeds, busting asphalt to make way for the new parking lot. Don't know why they needed one — the screws and admin parked in a garage and there were maybe three cars in front, counting mine.

"After I handed my I.D. to the guards in the gatehouse, they buzzed me through to a short, uncovered promenade. Heavy gauge chain link made a funnel toward the main complex and as I walked I noticed there's graffiti on the concrete walls. Some of it'd been whitewashed, but only some. I saw SHAITAN IS THE MASTER and PRAISE BELIAL. BOW TO CHEMOSH O MAGGOTS. THE OLD ONE IS COMING. Frankly, it gave me the willies. Told myself they hadn't gotten around to scrubbing those sections. They'd missed a spot or two. Uh-huh.

"I was beginning to regret my impulsive nature. Not as if I'm green, or anything; I've been locked inside the kit kat for a minor beef. More than the graffiti was playing on my nerves, though. The guards seemed off key. The whole bunch of them were sluggish as hornets drunk on hard cider. Swear to God one was jacking off up in the tower; his rifle kinda bounced on its shoulder strap.

"Warden Loveless, he's this pencil-dick bean counter with thick glasses; he didn't blink while we were jawing. Sounded like one of my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

undergrad English lit profs, droned through his nose. Don't recall his little list of rules and regs, but I can't forget him drooling on his collar. He kept dabbing it with a fancy handkerchief. I tried not to stare, but damn.

"The warden says he's glad I made it, he thought I had changed my mind, and he sounded relieved, joked about sending some of the boys to bring me in if I hadn't come. Warden Loveless says Tyler Choate is expecting me, that we should go visit him right away, and let me tell you the only reason I didn't turn on my heel and walk out was there were several men holding carbines at half mast and staring at me with zombie eyes, and I think some of them were drooling too. See, I coulda sworn Loveless said, *Master* instead of Tyler. Acoustics were pretty screwed up in there, though.

"Loveless takes me on a walking tour of the prison. Place probably hadn't been remodeled since the forties or fifties, exposed pipe and those grilled-in bulbs. Damp and foul as a latrine, mildew creeping in every joint. Damned dark; seemed like most of the lights had been busted and never replaced. Another odd detail — three quarters of the cells were empty. We've got the planet's most crowded prison system and this place is deserted.

"We rode an elevator to the sublevels, a steel cage like coal miners crowd into. Down, way down. The cage rattled and groaned and I never realized before that I'm claustrophobic. Okay, something funny happened to me. The walls closed in and my collar got tight. I...started seeing things. No sound, only images, clear as day, like my mind was the Bijou running a matinee horror flick.

"That goddamned barn of yours. My mom and pop squirming in a lake of worms. Helen grinning at me. Jellyfish. I hate those things. Got stung once in Virginia when I spent the summer with my cousin. I nearly drowned. Goddamned things. I saw other stuff, stuff I don't want to remember. So damn real I got vertigo, thought the floor was gonna drop from under me.

"Maybe I'm not claustrophobic, maybe it was something else. Fumes. Stress. My daddy had shellshock when he came home from Korea. Flipped his wig every so often, beat the hell outta his fellow drunks at the tavern. When he was like that, he'd sit in his rocker till the A.M., cleaning his Winchester and staring at nothing, face of a china plate. Said he saw the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gooks coming, too many, not enough bullets, stabbed so many his bayonet got dull as a butter knife. My old man drank wood grain alcohol through a funnel; smelled like a refinery before he died.

"Riding down in that elevator, I bet my face looked like his when he was fighting ghosts. I played it cool, gritted my teeth and thought about the Red Sox batting order, getting laid by the chick who used to come by the Mud Shack every Thursday with her sister, whatever happy shit I could dream up on short notice. The vertigo and the visions went away when we hit bottom. A broken circuit. After a few steps it was easy to think the whole episode was a brain fart, my bout with the pink elephants. Yeah, I had DT's. Been trying to kick the sauce, and you know how that is.... My hands were doing the Parkinson's polka.

"Loveless called this level the Isolation Ward; told me to follow the lights to H Block; said he'd wait for me. No rush. Choate didn't entertain every day.

"More graffiti. More by a thousand fold. Numbers, symbols, gibberish. It covered the tunnel walls, ceiling, the cell bars. Probably inside the cells too, but those things were black as a well-digger's asshole. Kicker is, I saw one of the fellas responsible for the artwork — this scrawny man in filthy dungarees was doing the honors. Must've been eighty years old; His ribs stuck out and his eyes were milky. Blind as hell. He carted a couple buckets of black and white paint and was slapping brush-loads onto the concrete. After he'd made a nice mess, he'd get a different brush to start turning the shapeless gobs into letters and such. Precise as a surgeon, too. Kind of fascinating except for the parts I could read were little gems like: WORMS OF THE MAW WILL FEED ON THY LIVER and INFIDELS WILL CHOKE ON THE MASTER'S SHIT.

"There was a guard station and a gate. While the gate was grinding open I heard music up ahead, distorted by the echoes of clanging metal and my heart. Thought I was gonna have a coronary right there. A bloody glow oozed from the mouth of a cell. It was the only light after the wimpy fluorescent strip in the guard shack.

"Tyler Choate had himself a cozy pad there in the bowels of Station 3. They'd even removed the door; it was lying farther down the hall, as if somebody had chucked it aside for the recycling man. Chinese paper lamps were everywhere, floating in the dark; that's what gave off the red

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

glow. The bunks had been ripped out, replaced by a hammock and some chairs. Bamboo. Oriental rugs, a humongous vase with a dead fern. Big wooden cabinets loaded with knickknacks, bric-a-bracs and liquor. Sweet Jesus, the old boy loves his liquor. Found out later most of the doodads were from China, the Polynesian Islands, a bunch of places I can't pronounce. Who would've guessed this hick deputy for a traveling man, right?

"Music was coming from an antique record player — the type with a horn and a hand crank. A French diva sang the blues and Tyler Choate soaked her up in a big reed chair, feet propped, eyes closed. Real long hair; oily black in a pony tail looped around his neck. He looked like a Satanic Buddha — skinny on the ends and bloated in the middle.

"I noticed the shoe collection. Dozens and dozens of shoes and boots, lined up neat as you please along the wall and into the shadows of the adjoining cell where the red light didn't quite reach. None of them were the right size for Choate — his slippers were enormous; the size of snowshoes, easy. Tailor-made for sure.

"Then he says to me, *Welcome to the Mandarin Suite, Mr. Pride. Take off your shoes.* His voice was lispy, like the queers that hang around beauty parlors. But not like that either. This was different. He sounded...amused. Smug.

"The elevator ride had rattled me, sure, sure, but not enough to account for the dread that fell on me as I stood in that dungeon and gawped at him. I felt woozy again, same as the elevator, worse than the elevator. Swear, he coulda been beaming these terrible thoughts into my head. I kept seeing Randy Freeman's face, all splattered and buried in mud. Why would I see such a thing, Wally? Doesn't make sense.

"When Choate stood to shake my hand, I nearly crapped my pants. I knew from the files the Choate brothers were tall, but I swear he wasn't much shy of eight feet, and an axe-handle broad. He wore a white silk shirt with stains around the pits. He smelled rank. Rank as sewage, a pail of fish guts gone to the maggots. A fly landed on his wrist, crawled into his sleeve. Bruenig wasn't jiving about those kids being filthy.

"My hand disappeared into Choate's and I decided that I'd really and truly screwed up. Like sticking my hand into a crack in the earth and watching it shut. Except, he didn't pulp my bones, didn't yank me in close

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for a hillbilly waltz, nothing like that. He said he was happy to meet a real live P.I., made me sit in the best chair and poured Johnny Walker Black in greasy shot glasses, drank to my health. All very cordial and civilized. He asked if I had met his brother, and I said no, but Josh was hanging around your house and it really had to stop. He agreed that Josh was on the rude side — he'd always been a touch wild. Choate asked what you thought about the barn, if you'd figured it out yet. I said no and he laughed, said since you hadn't blown your brains out, you must not know the whole truth, which, to me, sounded like some more hocus pocus crap was in the offing. I wasn't wrong on that count. Did I know anything about String Theory? He thought I looked like a guy who might dabble in particle physics between trailing unfaithful husbands and busting people's heads. I told him I'm more of a Yeats man and he said poetry was an inferior expression of the True Art. What about molecular biology; surely I craved to understand how we apes rose from primordial slime. No? Supersymmetry? Hell no, says I and he chuckled and filled my glass. Guess the Bruenig spiel was right about a few things. The Choate men were scientists, always have been interested in the stars and nature, time travel and all sorts of esoteric shit. Mostly they studied how animals and insects live, how, lemmesee...how *biological organisms adapt and evolve in deep quantum time. The very nature of space time itself.* Choate said the family patriarchs had been prying into that particular branch of scientific research since before the Dark Ages.

"What was Kaleb's interest? Tyler said, *Hypermutation and punctuated equilibrium.* Started in on those SQUIDS Salter told me about. Kaleb wanted to accelerate his own genetic evolution. He grafted these home-made SQUIDS onto his brain and that jumpstarted the process. I can just imagine the operation. Brrr. He survived without lobotomizing himself and it was a roaring success. The implant heightened his mental acuity by an incredible degree, which led to more inventions — *Devices Tesla never dreamt of — never dared!* Jesus Louise...shoulda seen Tyler Choate's face when he said that. He leered at me like he intended to make me his *numero uno* bitch.

"What kind of devices, you may be asking. See, Grandpa figured there was a way to configure electromagnetic pulses to create a black hole, or a kind of controlled tear in subatomic matter, and I heard some think-tank

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

guys in Boston tried the very same thing a few years ago, so between you and me, maybe the geezer wasn't totally bonkers, but anyhow. Kaleb wanted to use this black hole, or whatever the hell it's supposed to be, to access a special radioactive energy. They'd detected traces of it in the pylons, like Salter said, and Tyler confirmed the radiation doesn't exist anywhere in the known spectrum.

"I'm blitzed and feeling a bit kamikaze, so I ask, where's it come from, then? *Out there*, is how Tyler put it. *Out there in the great Dark*. So picture this: this friggin' psycho hillbilly leaning over me with his face painted like blood in the lamplight, sneering about *ineffable mysteries* and flexing his monster hands as if he's practicing to choke a camel. He grins and says Grandpa Kaleb bored a hole in space and crawled through. Tyler started spouting truly wild-ass stuff. Some bizarre mumbo-jumbo about a vast rift, the cosmic version of the Marianas Trench. He said very old and truly awful things are drifting in the dark and it's damned lucky for us apes that these huge, blind things haven't taken any notice of planet Earth.

"Tyler said Kaleb became *The door and the bridge. The mouth of the pit*. And if that wasn't enough, Tyler and Josh are hanging around because the rest of Kaleb's heirs have been taken to His bosom, rejoined the fold. Tyler and Josh had been left with us chickens to, I dunno, guard the henhouse or something. To make things ready. Ready for what? *For the Old Man, of course. For his return*. I didn't press him on that.

"Another thing...The bonus effect of Kaleb's gizmo's electromagnetic pulse is it's real nifty for shutting off car engines and stranding people near the ol' farm...I asked why they wanted to strand people near their property and he just looked at me. Scary, man. He said, *Why? Because it gives Him tremendous pleasure to meet new and interesting people. Grandfather always liked people. Now He loves them. Sadly, folks don't drop by too often. We keep Him company as best we can. We're good boys like that.*

"By this point I was pretty much past wasted and I know he went on and on, but most of it flew over my head. One thing that stuck with me as I got ready to stagger outta there, is he clamped one giant paw on my shoulder and said with that creepy smile of his, *Out there is a relative term, it's closer than you might think. Oh my, the great Dark is only as*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

far away as your closet when you kill the light...as your reflection when it thinks you aren't looking. Bye, bye and see you soon.

"I beat it topside. Barefoot. Bastard kept my shoes...." Pride's narrative faltered and was replaced by a thumping noise in the background. A chair squeaked. He spoke from a distance, perhaps the motel room door. "Yeah? Oh, hey — " His voice degenerated into jags of a garbled conversation followed by a long, blank gap; then a wheeze like water gurgling in a hose. Another gap. Someone coughed and chuckled. Then silence.

17.

Wallace gazed at the rolling wheels as dead air hissed through the speaker. He emptied the dingy shoebox on his desk, pushed the yellow papers like a man shuffling dominos or tarot cards. He poured another drink from the dwindling bottle, squinted at the cramped script done in bleeding ink, whole paragraphs deformed by water stains and stains of other kinds and the depredations of silverfish. There were schematics, as Delaney had promised — arcane, incomprehensible figures with foreign notations.

The house was dark but for the lamp on Wallace's desk. The walls shuddered from a blast of wind. Rain smacked hard against the windows. Floorboards creaked heavily and Wallace strained to detect the other fleeing sound — a rustling, a whisper, an inhalation like a soft, weak moan. He wiped his face and listened, but there was nothing except whistling pipes. He poured another drink and now the bottle was dry.

He sifted through the letters, sprinkling them with vodka because his hands were trembling. He studied one dated February 1971. It was somewhat legible:

Eli,

The expedition has gone remarkably well, thanks to your timely assistance. It is indeed as Grandfather says, "Per aspera ad astra that we seek communion and grace from our patrons of antiquity." I shall keep you apprised of developments. Yours, P. Choate.

Another, from June 1971:

Grandfather has sent word from the gulf, Ab ovo, as it were. It is as they promised...and more. His words to me: "Non sum qualis eram." It

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is the truth. He is the door and the bridge and we are grateful. On the day all doors are thrown open, you shall be remembered and honored for your service to the Grand Estate. Thank you, dear friend. Yours, P. Choate.

He counted roughly three dozen others, including some photographs, mostly ruined. He paused at a warped and faded postcard picturing a ramshackle barn in a field. It was unclear whether this was an etching or an actual photograph — the perspective featured the southeast face of the barn and the road in the distance. He could barely make out the Bentley on the shoulder, a man working under the raised hood. The back of the card was unstamped and grimy with fingerprints. It had been addressed to Mr. Wallace Smith of 1313 Vineland Drive. October 6, 1926:

Hello, Wallace.

Helen wishes you were here.

Regards, K. Choate.

Wallace's belly sank into itself. What could it possibly mean?

Grandfather always liked people. Now he loves them.

The house shook again and Wallace dropped the card. He was nauseated. "*Mr. Smith*?" The intercom squawked and he almost pissed himself. "*— to say good night*?" Kate was nearly unintelligible over the intercom.

"What!" He nearly shattered the plastic from the force of his blow. He took a breath, said in a more reasonable tone, "I'll be there in a minute."

The desk lamp flickered. *I am here to usher in the dark*. Wallace dialed Pride's cell number and received no answer. He pushed away from the desk, stood, and shuffled in a dream to the hallway. A draft ran cold around his ankles and when he thumbed the switch, the lights hesitated in their sockets, grudgingly ignited and shone dim and milky. Shadows spread across the floor and climbed the walls.

Wallace plodded forward and ended up at Helen's door. Helen's door was made of thick oak and decorated with filigreed panels. He stood before the oak door and breathed through his mouth, blowing like a dray horse.

Cancer always returns.

Wallace turned the knob and pushed into Helen's apartment. He slapped the switch and nothing happened. The dimensions were all wrong; the room had become an undersea cavern where a whale had bloated on its gasses and putrefied. Objects assumed phantom shapes in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the sleepy murk: the therapy table and its glinting buckles; a pinewood armoire; a scattering of chairs; the unmade bed, a wedge of ivory sheets and iron lattice near the opaque window.

Wallace detected a hushed, sticky sound. The muffled squelch of a piglet snuffling its mother's teat, smacking and slobbering with primal greed. As he turned toward the disturbance, something damp and slender tickled the back of his neck. Then his scalp, his left ear, his cheek. Something like moist jelly strands entangled him. These tendrils floated everywhere, a veritable hanging garden of angel's hair gently undulating in the crosshatched light from the hallway. Wallace cried out and batted the strands like a man flailing at cobwebs.

He gaped up into the blue-black shadows and did not comprehend the puzzle of dangling feet, one in a shoe, the other encased in hosiery; or the legs, also wrapped in nylon hose that terminated at the hem of a skirt. Wallace did not recognize the mannequin extremities, jittering feebly with each impulse of a live current. The left shoe, a square, wooden thing with a blunt nose, plopped onto the hardwood as the legs quivered and slid upward, vanishing to mid-thigh attended by the sound of a squishing sponge.

Wallace was confused; his mind twittered with half-formed memories, fragmented pictures. All circuits busy, please try again. He thought, *Kate's shoe. Kate's shoe is on the floor. Kate's legs. Where's the rest of her. Where oh where oh fuck me.* He beheld it then, an elephantine mass lodged in the ceiling, an obscene scribble of shivering tapioca and multi-jointed limbs. A gory fissure traversed its axis and disgorged the myriad glutinous threads. The behemoth wore a wicked old man's face with a clotted vandyke, a hooked nose, and wet, staring eyes that shone like cinders of dead stars. The old man patiently sucked Kate the Nurse into his mouth. Ropes of viscid yolk dripped from the corners of the old man's lips and pattered on the floor. Wallace thought with hysterical glee, *Gulper eel, gulper eel!* Which was an eel that lived in the greatest depths and could quite handily unhinge its skull to swallow large prey.

Wallace reeled.

The bloody fissure throbbed and seeped; and following the convulsion, he discovered the abomination's second head. He glimpsed Helen's pallid torso, her drooping breasts and slack face — an alto-relievo sculpted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from wax at the apex of the monstrous coagulation of her body. The crack nearly divided her face and skull and it fractured the ceiling with a jagged chasm that traveled far beyond the reach of any light.

Helen opened her eyes and smiled at Wallace. Her smile was sweet and infinitely mindless. Her mouth formed a perfect black circle that began to dilate fantastically and she craned her overlong neck as if to kiss him.

Wallace screamed and stumbled away. He was a man slogging in mud. The vermiculate tendrils boiled around him, coiled in his hair, draped his shoulders and slithered down the collar of his shirt.

He was still screaming when he staggered into the hall and yanked the door shut. He crabbed two steps sideways and tottered. His legs gave way and the floor and walls rolled and then he was prone with his right arm flung out before him in a ghastly imitation of a breast stroke.

A wave of lassitude suffused him, as if the doctor had given him a yeoman's dose of morphine, and in its wake, pins and needles, and hollowness. Countless tendrils had oozed through the doorjamb, the spaces between the hinges, the keyhole, and burrowed into him so snugly he was vaguely aware of their insistent twitches and tugs. Dozens were buried in the back of his hand and arm, reshaping the veins and arteries; more filaments nested in his back, neck and skull, everywhere. As he watched, unable to blink, their translucence flushed a rich crimson that flowed back toward their source, drawn inexorably by an imponderable suction.

He went under.

18.

Wallace regained consciousness.

The veins in his hand had collapsed and the flesh was pale and sunken like the cracked hand of a mummy. Near his cheek rested a sandal that surely belonged to a giant. The sandal was caked in filth and blood.

"Are you sleeping, brother Wallace?" Josh said. "I want to show you something beautiful." He opened the door. Wallace's eyes rolled up as he was steadily drawn across the threshold and into darkness.

Oh, sweetheart, Helen said eagerly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

19.

Delaney came in that morning and boiled himself a cup of instant coffee and poured a bowl of cereal and had finished both before he realized something was wrong. The house lay vast and quiet except for small sounds. Where was the hubbub of daily routine? Helen had usually begun shrieking by now, and Cecil inevitably put on one of the old classical heavies like Mozart or Beethoven in hopes of calming her down. Not today — today nothing stirred except the periodic rush of air through the ducts.

Delaney lighted a cigarette and smoked and tried to convince himself he was jumpy over nothing. He went upstairs and found Wallace's bedroom empty. Near Helen's suite, he came across a muddy track. The shoe print was freakishly large. Delaney pulled a switchblade from his pocket and snicked it open. He put his hand on the door knob and now his nerves were jangling full alarm like they sometimes had back in the bad old days of gang battles and liquor store hold-ups and dodging Johnny Law. The air was supercharged. And the doorknob was sticky. He stepped back and regarded, stoic as a wolf in the face of the unknown, his red fingers. A fly hummed and circled his head.

He bounced the switchblade in his palm and decided, to hell with it, he was going in, and then a woman giggled and whispered something and part of the something contained *Delaney*. He knew that voice. It had been months since he heard it last. "Screw this noise," he said, very matter of fact. He turned and loped for the stairs.

Delaney calmed by degrees once he was outside, and walked swiftly across the waterlogged grounds to his cottage where he threw a few essentials into his ancient sea bag — the very one his daddy brought home from the service — checked his automatic and stuffed it under his shirt. He started his Cadillac and rolled to the gate. His breathing had slowed, he had combed his hair and gotten a grip and was almost normal on the surface. At least his hands had stopped shaking. He forced a cool, detached smile. The smile that said, *Hello, officer. Why, yes, everything is fine.*

Charlie the guard was a pimply twenty-something with disheveled hair and an ill-fitting uniform. He was obviously hung over and scarcely glanced up at Delaney as he buzzed the gate. "See ya, Mr. Dee."

"Hey, any trouble lately? Ya know — anything on the cameras?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Charlie shrugged. "Nah. Well, uh, the feed's been kinda wonky off 'n on."

"Wonky?"

"Nothin' to worry 'bout, Mr. Dee. We ain't seen any prowlers."

"What about the night fella?"

"Uh, Tom. He woulda said somethin' if there was a problem. Why?"

"No reason. I figured as much. You take care, partner." Delaney pushed his sunglasses into place and gave the guard a little two-finger salute. He cast a quick, final glance at the house in his rearview mirror, but the view was spoiled by a crack in the glass. Had that been there before? He tacked it on his list of things-to-do once he got wherever he was going. Where was he going? Far away, that was certain.

Delaney gunned the engine and cruised down the driveway. He vanished around the bend as Charlie set aside his copy of *Sports Illustrated* to answer the phone. "Uh, yeah. Oh, mornin', Mr. Smith. Uh.... Okay, sure. Right now? Yessir!" Charlie hung up with a worried expression. It was only his second week on the job. He walked briskly to the big house, opened the door, and hurried inside.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH MARKS the return of Ysabeau Wilce, who made a big impression with "Metal More Attractive" back in 2004. In "The Lineaments of Gratified Desire," we'll be immersed again in the rich and imaginative world of Hardhands, the Pontifexa, and Tiny Doom (along with her pig). This one's a treat.

And speaking of other worlds, Robert Onopa takes us across the stars in "Republic" with a new science fiction story of a sort we haven't seen around here often enough.

The months ahead will also include new stories by Chris Willrich, Matthew Hughes, Terry Bisson, and Carolyn Ives Gilman, to name but a few. Christmas might be months away but any time of the year is a good time to give a friend a gift subscription of *F&SF*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

C. S. Friedman has published seven novels, including In Conquest Born, This Alien Shore, *and the Coldfire trilogy. Her next novel,* Feast of Souls, *is slated for publication next March. Her first appearance in our pages—one of her rare short works—is a sprightly story of the suspicion that Ms. Friedman earned a Master's Degree from a university in the American south, but we're sure that any similarities between her life and this fiction end right there.*

Terms of Engagement

By C. S. Friedman

I MADE A DEAL WITH THE roaches.

Mind you, it wasn't something I *wanted* to do. The way I'd been raised, bugs were something you talked to through the business end of a can of Raid, and the language consisted of one word: *Die!* My parents' home had been hermetically sealed by window and door Experts, and any insect that mistook its climate-controlled confines for suitable territory was quickly — and terminally — taught the error of its ways. Houses were for humans, not insects.

Yes, I knew there were places where people didn't have the money or inclination to wage war so successfully against the things that crept and slithered, the same way I knew there were striped horses in Africa and creatures in Australia that carried their young in a pouch. But those things weren't in *my* world, you understand. In *my* world, the closest you ever came to a cockroach was watching an insect documentary on PBS...and when the commercial came on you got up and washed your hands anyway, just because watching them made you feel so creepy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then I moved to Georgia.

I was in grad school then, and in grad school you don't get to live in a hermetically sealed environment. You live in a little apartment carved out of an aging house that boasts of "great atmosphere" and "proximity to the college" rather than things like "living space" and "working appliances." The living room wall may have had a little hole cut into it, in which a tiny air conditioner was placed in deference to "yankee tastes" (my southern friends all assured me that air conditioning was unhealthy), but its existence was mostly for cosmetic purposes, as it couldn't handle the kind of heat the Georgia sun belts out. Next door to the west would be a fraternity house, most likely, which meant an ancient mansion taken over by beer-swilling college boys with the personal hygiene habits of a sewer rat and the social habits of...well, let's just say the cockroaches loved it there. To the east would be a sorority house, whose members valued the condition of their property a bit more than the guys did, and maintained it by partying on the street in front of your apartment instead of at their own place, leaving enough trash behind to feed a six-legged army.

At night the cockroaches would come out and dance on the sidewalk. I'm not kidding. You'd be walking down the street your first night in town, looking straight ahead like yankees are taught to do (gotta watch for muggers!), grateful that the blazing sun had set at last, when suddenly, squish! You would look down, wondering what the hell you had stepped on...and you saw a few dozen roaches contemplating the same question. They were all over the sidewalk when night fell, celebrating the pleasures of cool concrete, or something like that, and you couldn't just ignore them or your shoes would be a mess, so you had to actually *watch* them, every step of the way, all the way home. Big ones and small ones, sturdy aggressive ones and little shy ones...all dancing around as if they were in Times Square and the New Year's Eve ball had just dropped.

My friends assured me the big ones weren't really roaches, but some other kind of insect instead. That was supposed to make things better. I suppose when a creepy bug runs across your kitchen counter and it's three inches long (I am not exaggerating) and it looks like a roach and moves like a roach, it helps a lot to tell yourself "Hey, it's only a palmetto bug, calm down!" I mean, maybe there are some people who find that kind of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knowledge comforting, but in my book it's in the same category as "daddy long legs isn't really a spider."

Point is...you couldn't get away from them, no matter how hard you tried.

I had one of those little apartments, complete with the air conditioner in a hole in the wall. The hole might have matched the air conditioner once, but years of vibrations and leaky drips had eaten away at the plaster surrounding, until, if you crouched in front of it just right, you could see the sunlight shining through on three sides of it. Highway for insects, to be sure. So I plastered that up, just like all the other grad students had done before me, but it didn't help much, because while you were closing up one hole there was another one being eaten away at the corner of a back window, or through the back of a closet, or somewhere else that cockroaches wanted to be.

It was war, plain and simple.

Trouble was, I was losing.

Oh, I'd started with all the best things an army can have: good spirit, excellent supplies, and a solid game plan. I had roach traps inside all my kitchen cabinets and cans of Raid in easy reach in every room, and after two months of particularly bad infestation I even got my landlord to spray the place down. All of which just serves to breed better roaches. Think about it. The ones who get caught in the traps are the stupid ones who can't tell "food" from "danger," and you just took them out of the gene pool. The ones the exterminator gets are the ones that can't run away fast enough, or maybe they are too territorial to know when a battle is lost and they need to retreat and regroup in some other grad student's apartment. Ditto the gene pool note for those guys. So the next generation, when it returns — and it *will* return — is less likely to get caught in traps, less likely to be at home when the exterminator calls, and more likely to have cousins who come for a visit when the apartment next door is being sprayed.

If you're thinking "you can't win"...you're right.

Did you know that roaches are one of the oldest forms of life on Earth? And that if Georgia were hit with a nuclear bomb tomorrow, and the radiation was so hot that all the humans died, the roaches would get on just fine?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

All of which does not comfort you when it's three in the morning and you wake up because something with six legs and antennae has decided your face is the place it wants to be.

I won't bore you with tales of all my many losing battles. They were the same battles that women have fought since the beginning of time, and I lost them for the same reasons my cave-dwelling ancestors probably lost them ten thousand years ago. Whatever you do to roaches, they figure it out and learn how to work around you. And even if you manage to kill a bunch of them off there are always more, ready to take their place.

One day I was at a friend's house. There were a lot of people over, mostly grad students griping about one class or another, and our host was doing something at the sink when he let out a yelp suddenly and called us all over. We came running, but by then the thing he'd seen was gone.

"They've adapted!" he cried, and he told us breathlessly of a pair of roaches he'd seen, with translucent shells that *matched the formica*. Yes, those creepy bastards had finally bred a variation that allowed them to match kitchen counters, making them all but invisible in a modern urban environment! It was Darwinian evolution in action, and we were all pretty damn awed by it.

You know what was creepiest about that moment, in retrospect? That not one of us doubted it had happened! Not one of us doubted that roaches were indeed adaptable enough to evolve a slick change like that, and do it in time to cash in on current countertop fashions, before the colors all changed and they were visible again. But in fact they hadn't done that, I found out later. It turns out that when roaches are first born they have naturally translucent shells for about a month, that darken as they harden later. But did we ask back then if that was possible? No. Did we harbor *any* doubt that the roaches had done what my friend claimed, and developed a new weapon in the eternal war for kitchen dominance? Of course not. Roaches might be our enemy, but they were a respected enemy, and we did not kid ourselves one iota about their capacity to innovate, genetically or otherwise.

That night I made a deal with the roaches in my apartment. That is, I offered them a deal. Since I'd spent the better part of two years killing them, they were understandably wary of sending anyone out to parley with me, but I went into the kitchen where I knew most of them were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hiding and I told them my plans loud enough for all to hear. I figured they'd let me know if it was acceptable or not.

"Look guys," I said. "I can't stand you being here, and you're obviously not going to leave no matter how many times I spray the place, so we've hit a kind of stalemate. I'm betting you don't like this situation any more than I do. So I'm going to offer you a compromise. You can live in my apartment all you want, you can eat all the food you can find that's out in the open, when the lights go off...but *I don't want to see you.* Does that sound fair?"

I listened for a minute, and there were no roaches telling me I was being unreasonable, so I went on. "Here's the deal, guys. Every room I go into, I'm gonna turn on the light first. No more of me wandering around in the dark; you'll all have fair warning that I'm coming. When you see that light, you go running for cover. And anyone who's out of sight by the time I arrive is safe. I won't set traps for them, I won't spray their homes, nothing. The rest...the rest are fair game."

It was a devious plan, and I'm not sure the roaches fully grasped its brilliance. You see, not only was I offering to spare those roaches whose behavior was suitably discreet, I'd be breeding their good habits into the swarm. By killing *only* those who stayed out when the lights were on, I'd be giving the reproductive advantage to those who instinctively ducked for cover right away. Eventually I'd have bred in that quality to the local population as a whole, and voilà! I'd never have to see another roach again.

Darwin was a genius, wasn't he?

"Oh," I added, as I left the kitchen (turning out the light as I did so), "stay out of the bedroom too, would you?" I didn't offer a deal to cover that but I thought they might be willing to throw it in, good faith gesture and all that.

I should note at this point that my boyfriend thought I was a raving loon. That isn't quite as judgmental as it sounds, since on a normal day he didn't think I was exactly a poster child for rational thinking. That's because he was a business major, and anything that could not be graphed out on a chart or broken down into a spreadsheet format was, for him, not worth paying attention to. Since I was an artist, that included most of my life. So he spent most of his time with me trying not to express what he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

really thought about my profession, which was all right because at least he tried. What more could you ask out of a poor business major? The sex was pretty good, at least. That made up for a lot.

But this was evidently too much for him. "*You made a deal with the roaches*?"

"It's an experiment in natural selection," I tried to explain. "You see, Darwinian theory — "

But he wasn't having any of it. He lectured me for half an hour on the craziness of trying to make deals with insects, which made me wonder if the sex was really *that* good, after all. I mean, even an artist has her limits. He came one step short of saying I was crazy enough to be committed, but only just one step. Listening to him rage, I wondered what the roaches thought of it all, from their hidden spots in the kitchen. God knows he was ranting loudly enough for every roach in the apartment complex to hear him.

Could I actually alter a species to suit my needs? Was the mere thought of doing so the ultimate in hubris, or simply my own adaptation to our shared environmental problem? If the roaches in my apartment came to bear a genetic predisposition to "play by the rules," might they, in their romantic dalliances with neighboring roaches, pass the lesson on? My friends were fascinated by these and other questions, and demanded daily dispatches from me on how things were going in the War Zone. One even expressed regret that he had not studied my roach population before my experiment began, so that he could use the results as part of his master's thesis.

And the news was...it was working. Sure, it was weird for me at first, reaching into the bathroom to flick on the light a full minute before I looked inside. And sure it was messy at first, with all the roaches that hadn't gotten with the program needing to be dispatched before anything else was done. Sometimes in the middle of the night you just want to do your business and go back to bed, you know? But damn it all if after a few weeks there weren't fewer and fewer roaches to kill. I knew I hadn't gotten them all, so it had to be that the rest were learning the house rules. Maybe they would teach their young, and help the Darwinian thing along.

My boyfriend still thought I was a loon. In fact, the better my experiment was proceeding, the more upset he seemed to get about it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You're obsessed with the damn roaches!" he accused, in a tone of voice that made it clear the *real* crime was that I was not obsessed enough with him. "Do you really think they give a damn about this 'treaty' you have with them?" He even got mad at me for leaving the bathroom light on when he was sleeping at my place. But I knew he wouldn't respect my deal with the roaches enough to turn it on himself, and I didn't want any of my well-trained little roommates being trapped in the spotlight when they hadn't had fair warning. How could I expect all *their* people to respect our deal, if *my* people didn't?

One night we had a really big fight. I'd gone a month without seeing a single roach anywhere, and, well, it *was* a big deal. People who love you are supposed to share your triumphs, right? Or at least pretend they do? But he just got angrier than ever and went off on a tirade about how anyone whose life revolved around the learning curve of roaches (he said it that way, "learning curve," as if it was some business thing he'd charted out) maybe didn't belong in his life. So I yelled back, and then I cried, and he finally stopped yelling at me but he didn't cry, and finally we made up. Sorta. We had sex anyway. But there's only so many times sex can fix a broken relationship, and I felt somewhere in the middle of it like we'd just passed that point.

It was an oppressively hot night, and the little air conditioner in the living room wall was gamely doing its best, but it was a long stretch between there and the bedroom, and in the summertime cool air only gets so far before the Georgia humidity beats it to death. I tossed and turned and I guess I finally woke him up, because he whispered to me, "You okay, babe? You need anything?" You could tell from his tone of voice he felt a little guilty about the fight we'd had, which was fine by me.

"Just hot," I said. It would have been a lot cooler without someone else in the bed, but that wasn't the kind of thing you said out loud. "Could you get me a glass of water, maybe?"

He nodded and got up to do it. I heard him pad his way to the kitchen in the darkness. For a brief moment I thought I should remind him about the lights, and then I thought, *screw him*. He didn't respect my deal with the roaches, let him trip over a few in the dark. Maybe then he'd appreciate what I had accomplished and respect the rules of the house.

The bed was a lot cooler without him in it. I found a spot in the middle

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

without any body heat at all and snuggled into it. In the distance I heard the fridge door open and the ice tray crackling as he broke the cubes apart. Ice. Good thought. I could almost forgive him, for bringing me ice. Then there was a big thump, which I thought at first was the fridge door closing, but it really wasn't like that at all...and then silence.

"Hey!" No answer. I called his name. Still no answer. There was an odd scraping sound then, and the glassy tinkling of ice cubes hitting each other. So he was still moving around in there, anyway. "You okay?" It really was dark. I shouldn't have let him feel his way in there without some kind of light.

He knew where the light switch was. He wanted to prove a point.

Finally he had just been gone too long for comfort. I got up from bed myself and went to the doorway, slid my hand around the doorjamb and flicked on the hall light. Counted to ten. Then I walked down the empty hall to my kitchen. It was quiet now, but I could see even from around the corner that he'd left the fridge door open. I slid my hand around the corner and turned on that light, then counted to ten. Then entered.

All quiet.

No boyfriend.

There were ice cubes on the floor. They were already starting to melt. Some of the water had been dragged in little trails across the linoleum, to a place right under the sink. The cabinet doors there were partly open, as though someone had been getting something out of it when he was interrupted.

Or been putting something in.

I just stared at it for a few minutes and then walked very slowly to where the open cabinet was. I didn't keep anything under there as a rule, so there wasn't really any reason a person should have to look inside. No reason at all. I considered the open doors for a moment and then reached out and shut them both. It was easy for a person to do. Would have been harder for bugs to manage those big, heavy doors...especially if their little hands were already being used for something else.

I guess maybe I could have done something else instead. Screamed my head off, maybe, or called in the exterminators, or turned on all the lights in the house and then transferred to some other college far, far away, where I never had to look at a Georgia cockroach again. Something like

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that. But I had *told* them they could have any food they found, when the lights were off. And they *were* staying out of the bedroom, just like I'd asked them to.

The bed had cooled off a bit by the time I got back to it, which was something, anyway. I lay in bed for a while listening to the silence, and then slowly drifted off to sleep.

It's always easier to sleep alone in the summer.

"So he was already dead when you got there! You've used that *alibi before."*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

THE MASTER OF ERROR

JANUARY is the cruelest month, breeding Z-pictures out of the dead land. As the awards contenders roll out into wider release across the country, in their wake comes a tide of losers: *Grandma's Boy, Big Momma's House 2, Underworld: Evolution, Glory Road*, et al, movies that the studios hope will attract their maximum audience against weak competition, that will lure the dollar of the filmgoer desperate for something new. It's an unsettling time for hoppers (those who, like myself, buy a ticket to a multiplex and are prone to try several movies before settling on one.) You may, as did I, encounter clumps of anxious people gathered by a cardboard display for an upcoming film, discussing the perils attendant upon the return of the Deathdealer, Kate Beckinsale, or inquiring of each other whether the disease that afflicts Queen Latifah in *Last Holiday* is communicable. While browsing the edges of such a group, I overheard a man say, "You know, Kevin Reynolds' *Tristan and Isolde* isn't completely awful. I mean it won't make your eyes bleed." Faint praise, yet I was encouraged. The legend of Tristan and Isolde, the inspiration for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, contained a dragon, mystical forces, magical rings and elixirs. It would, I thought, be a good movie to review for *F&SF*.

Sad to say, this did not prove to be the case.

Reynolds, who brought us the scintillating comedies *Waterworld* and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, both featuring the unparalleled comic talents of Kevin Costner, master of a thousand accents and a single facial expression, has apparently lost his sense of fun, for he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stripped every trace of the fantastic from the story. Oh, there is drab talk of elixirs and some subtly placed evidence of time travel, in that Sophia Myles (Isolde), a seventh-century princess, is heard to be reading poetry written in the sixteenth century by John Donne; yet that's not enough to qualify the movie as fantasy. What we're left with are a number of grungy battles, a few reasonably well-staged, others reminiscent of the crummier set pieces in Antoine Fuqua's equally scrofulous and unsatisfying demystification of the Arthurian legend, *King Arthur*, and a love story shot like an ad for Liz Taylor's White Diamonds, whose principals, Myles and James Franco (Tristan) try to out-petulant each other, Franco winning the pose-off by dint of a more eccentric hairstyle and a full-on Zoolander pout.

I went back out into the lobby. The other hoppers had vanished, gone to their respective fates, and, lacking direction, I wandered deeper and deeper into the bowels of the multiplex, coming at last to the door of a tiny auditorium tucked into a hidden corner. Perched atop the sign bearing the name of the movie that played behind the door was a raggedy black creature with a disproportionately large lower body. A shaggy, heavy-bottomed bird, judging by its clawed feet and hunched posture. I'd heard tell of these birds, known as edwoods, that would appear at certain theaters in order to warn people away from the unspeakable horrors that lay within, sometimes attempting to drive them off by spraying them with foul excretions; but, while I suspected this might be such a bird, I had no choice other than to go forward. The auditorium housed the only movie suitable for my *F&SF* review. I darted beneath the edwood (not entirely unscathed) and thus gained admittance to *BloodRayne* and the strange world of Uwe Boll, known to his devotees as the Master of Error.

Boll churns out movies loosely based on video games, those that have not been snatched up by the major studios (he currently has five pictures in various stages of production); and the movies he has thus far released have been invariably rotten. To understand Boll's career, why he continues to have a career following three straight disasters, one must look to German tax law, in particular to a bizarre clause that allows wealthy Germans who invest in a movie to write off the production costs, thereby greatly reducing their tax burden,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and to delay paying their taxes. Their investment is one hundred percent deductible, and if the whole scheme sounds a bit like the plotline of *The Producers*, well, it wouldn't be the first time that life imitated art. At any rate, in this context, Boll's films are less movies than exercises in exploitative capitalism. Unlike Ed Wood, to whom he has been compared, he's *trying* to make bad movies, or rather he's not really trying, he's simply giving full reign to his directorial instincts, which he knows are beyond awful. Having a figure like Ed Wood in the public consciousness helps Boll with his scam in that people tend to categorize him as a cult figure, to give him that sort of validation, when all he's doing is calculating how much he'll make in tax rebates. That said, he must have a knack for this kind of thing, because Boll's pictures are not merely bad, they are remarkably, almost supernaturally, bad, especially given that they're made with sizable budgets, and feature reputable actors.

How does a director of Boll's reputation gather a cast like that he assembled for *BloodRayne*: Ben Kingsley, Billy Zane, Michael Madsen, Udo Kier, Michael Paré, Geraldine Chaplin, Michelle Rodriguez, and Meatloaf Aday?

Here's how.

He finished casting the picture two weeks before beginning principal photography, and he did this because he tries to bring in actors who develop a tiny break in their schedules, figuring they'll say, What the hell? It's a paycheck. Boll shot *BloodRayne* in Romania. Zane was in Romania at the time, filming another project, and had a free day. Others in the cast have similar stories. Since the only actors who were on set throughout were Will Sanderson (a frequent Boll collaborator), Kristanna Loken (Rayne) who played the Terminatrix in *T3*, and Madsen, whose appearance (dissipated; thirty, forty pounds overweight) and performance (disinterested to the point of not bothering to lift his sword during a pitched battle) makes one wonder if he isn't following in the tradition of great Hollywood alcohol abusers, you may tend to accept that the reports were accurate. As for Sir Ben, whose stay in Romania was brief, taking his recent filmography into account, it's possible he wanted a counterweight to balance out the heights he hit in *A Sound of Thunder*.

In the eighteenth century (we are not told this, but I'm assuming as much because Michael Madsen is wearing a ruffled shirt, not a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wifebeater as his manner might convey), the beauteous Rayne is a freak in a small traveling circus, where she displays to the curious her ability to recover instantly from cuts and burns. In reality, she's a dhampir, half-human, half-vampire, Blade with (as a fan consistently mispells it on a Boll Website) "breats." When she suddenly recalls her true nature (how she lost her memory is not explained), she sets forth to track down and kill her vampire daddy, Kagan (Kingsley), who raped and killed her mother years before, and is attempting to establish vampire rule over the Earth by bringing together three relics, an eye, a heart, and a rib, that will gift him with godlike powers. Rayne then joins three members of the anti-Kagan Brimstone Society, Vladimir (Madsen), Sebastian (Matt Davis), and Katarin (Rodriguez), and off they go to Brimstone HQ to prepare for battle.

Dumb as it seems, the summary sounds a whole lot better than the movie actually plays.

Much of the unintentional humor in the film is provided by scriptwriter Guinevere Turner, whose previous credits (screenplays for *American Psycho* and *The Notorious Bettie Page*) would appear to promise writing of significantly higher quality. Here, however, is a short sample of her work in *BloodRayne*:

Sebastian: Would you care to go to dinner?

Rayne: I don't believe the food would be to my taste.

Sebastian: Why is it you think that only you feel pain?

There are no cues to make Sebastian's last statement seem other than a complete non-sequitor, and when you consider the dozens of equally ridiculous passages in the script, you're led to conclude that the entire population of eighteenth-century Romania were subject to bouts of surrealism or ADD.

But Turner's script is not the only source of humor. There are the battle scenes — the actors had no time to train with weapons and, at times, they scarcely do more than wave at each other. There are also Boll's trademark edits, cutting away in mid-scene to a completely unrelated scene in another part of the narrative; and his inimitable cinematography, which jumps about from Peter Jackson-esque long shots of riders on horseback, traversing mountains and valleys, to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

close-ups that reveal the intimate geography of Loken's breast and one monolithic nipple. And the performances.... How to choose from among them? We have Meatloaf Aday's one-scene turn as a jaded vampire brothelmaster, joined on his bed by scads of naked Romanian hookers (hired when Romanian actresses refused to take Boll's direction). Billy Zane, who disappears halfway through the film after two unnecessary scenes, as a fruity Brimstoner-gone-vampire, sitting in a chair and dictating letters to his scribe, whom at one point he calls "...a suck-up." Sir Ben's several scenes as Kagan, performed mostly while also sitting in a chair (I'm smelling sub-text here!), apparently determined not to move a muscle, like someone holding it in until the bathroom break. And let's not forget Madsen's death scene, wherein he rolls about on the floor in a bloody ruffled shirt and can be discerned taking peeks now and again so as to see what everyone else is doing. The boredom of the cast is obvious; the only one who appears to be trying is Loken, the clumsiest female actor in an action picture I've seen since *Cutthroat Island*, a pirate movie in which Geena Davis drew her sword out of its scabbard sideways, fearful of giving herself an owie. If you were to grab your sister out of an informal beach volleyball game, hand her a blade, and tell her to act violent and sexy, and she stood there gaping at you, considering her options.... That's about the same level of dramatic brio and physical energy that Loken brings to the role. She's such a terrible actress, it's difficult to believe that even Boll would hire her. I suppose she must do something well. Clean up around the set. Maybe help with the catering.

The German government is acting to close the tax loophole that permits Uwe Boll to thrive, to have his pictures distributed by Lion's Gate, to open a garbage bag like *BloodRayne* in a thousand theaters nationwide; but we haven't seen the end of him. As I said, he has five fully funded pictures in pre- or post-production, the next of which is 2006's *Dungeon Siege: In the Name of the King*. Perhaps because he thinks he will have to change his methods, Boll appears to be taking uncommon care with this picture. The cast has the usual haphazard feel: John Rhys-Davies, Matthew Lillard, Ray Liotta, Claire Forlani, Burt Reyolds (as the king), and — suprise, surprise! — Kristanna Loken. But it was shot by a well-thought-of cinematograper and the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fight choreography was handled by the man who performed the same chore for *House of Flying Daggers*. This may be a harbinger that Boll is about to become a real Ed Wood and strive for cinematic excellence. It's conceivable that, with his budgets, he may be capable of creating a product that achieves actual cinematic mediocrity, a class of product with which we are far too conversant, and, if so, if you have, like me, a savor for a certain grade of movie sludge, for the late-career films of Roger Corman or the current work of Steven Seagal, then you best hurry and get you some *BloodRayne*, some *Alone in the Dark* (Christian Slater's comeback movie), some *House of the Dead*, a movie so bad it rivals MST3K films like *Manos, Hands of Fate*.

I, for one, have faith that Boll will survive this turn of events. I believe he will find new ways to market the cinema of no-quality, even if he has to create a new niche in which to sell it. I believe that his philosophy of filmmaking is in tune with the times, in synch with the Hollywod milieu, and I believe, despite the undeserved hardships that the actions of the German tax authorities have placed upon him, that he will have increasing success. I believe that his tawdry, disorienting vision, not much different, really, than that of Michael Bay, will (in some dark form) prevail. Who knows? Perhaps his next movie will merit a February — or even a March — release, and do more than provide those who wander the multiplexes with a place to rest and close their eyes....

...Nah!

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

PLEASE DO NOT COUNT ON THE POST OFFICE TO FORWARD YOUR ISSUES AFTER YOU MOVE. IF YOU ARE PLANNING A CHANGE OF ADDRESS, PLEASE NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE, AND ALLOW SIX WEEKS FOR THE CHANGE TO BECOME EFFECTIVE. BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD AND NEW ADDRESS, INCLUDING THE ZIP CODES. PRINT CLEARLY AND, IF POSSIBLE, ATTACH AN OLD MAILING LABEL.

OR USE OUR HANDY CHANGE OF ADDRESS FORM ONLINE AT **www.fsfmag.com**

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE
Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Since his encounter with giants and dwarves in our February issue, Kedrigern the wizard has been keeping busy with research projects such as his study of hawks' eyesight. A good thing it is that he's rested, because his latest caper will take him and Princess into the ever-thorny world of diplomacy.

The Protectors of Zendor

By John Morressy

THEY CRESTED THE HILL and saw the towered and turreted walls of Zendor in the far distance. "We'll be there before sundown," Princess said. Kedrigern heaved a great sigh and reined in his horse. Princess halted at his side and cast a quick suspicious look in his direction.

The wizard closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. Without turning to her, he said, "I don't want to do this. I think helping Durmuk is a complete waste of time and magic."

"Never mind Durmuk. Do it for the people of Zendor," Princess said. "They're in great danger."

"The more I think about that, the less likely it seems. I don't trust Durmuk, and I don't trust his message."

In the tone one employs in dealing with a difficult child, Princess said, "It would be foolish to turn back when we're practically at the gates of Zendor. Let's go on. If we learn that he's deceived us, we'll leave."

Kedrigern emitted a wordless grumble. He did not want to go a step farther. They had spent eight days traveling here. That meant they would

Copyright © 2006 by John Morressy. All rights reserved.
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spend eight more returning, plus whatever time it took to find out the truth, if any, behind the summons. The possibility that all those days might be wasted made him contemplate colorful retaliation on the man who called himself Durmuk the Benign and whose benignity extended no farther than his feckless greedy self.

His message had been both blunt and vague: *Only the power of a great wizard can save the brave men of Zendor from a dreadful fate. Come to our aid, we implore you.* To any wizard unfamiliar with Durmuk and his ways, it was an appeal to honor and conscience, an inescapable moral obligation; and the promised fee was generous. But Kedrigern was acquainted with the man, and knew that it might mean no more than that someone beyond Durmuk's immediate reach was disturbing his personal comfort and convenience. If that turned out to be the case, Kedrigern promised himself, any fate involved would be a lot more dreadful than Durmuk intended.

And yet there was the possibility that Princess was right, the danger was real, and the message was in earnest. It was a remote possibility, but it existed. Even Durmuk was capable of truth in an emergency. All the same, he was a dismal specimen of a king: a spoiled and lazy glutton who concentrated on his own gratification and left Zendoran affairs in the hands of his numerous relatives. Why the people of Zendor, who liked to think of themselves as a proud and independent breed, had not sent this thoroughly worthless king and his parasitic family packing long ago, Kedrigern could not understand. Maybe they found them to their liking. If that were the case, they deserved one another and whatever befell them, and a wizard was a fool to waste his time helping them.

He was so absorbed in his sour brooding that Princess's sudden "Oh, dear me" startled him.

"What is it?" he cried in alarm. "Where?"

"There, right ahead of us."

He saw only a woman with a bundle in her arms. She was coming toward them at a headlong pace.

"You gave me a start. I thought we were being attacked."

"Perhaps we will be. That poor woman looks as though she's fleeing for her life."

Indeed, the woman came toward them like one at the end of her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strength, stumbling and nearly falling as she drew near. Kedrigern dismounted and called to her. "Are you in trouble? Can we help?"

She did not respond until she had stopped at Kedrigern's side, breathless with exhaustion. She appeared to be ready to collapse at his feet. He saw the trace of blood on her cheekbone and the bruise on her forearm, but before he could speak, she shrank away and said, "Don't stop for me, sir. They'll kill us if they catch us. Kill you, too, if you help."

"Nobody's going to kill anyone. Tell me who's threatening you."

"All of them. It's always the same. They hear him," she said, glancing down at the sleeping infant in her arms, "and they want to hurt us."

"What's wrong with him?" Kedrigern asked. The baby was no more than six months old. He was pink and sleepy, and looked to be utterly harmless.

"A spell. A terrible spell. When he cries...." She hesitated and then burst into sobs.

As Kedrigern looked on, uncertain what to do next — magic does not teach one to deal with the problems of babies — Princess said, "There's a cloud of dust on the road ahead. Someone's coming."

Kedrigern drew out his medallion and peered through the Aperture of True Vision. The dust cloud resolved into a crowd heading directly toward them. No, he corrected himself, not a crowd but a mob, armed and looking determined.

"Are those people after you?" he asked the woman.

"Yes. Let me go. I can still get away. Save yourselves."

A fine welcome this is, thought the wizard with rising anger. Invited here with a false message and greeted with a bloodthirsty mob to threaten me if I help a poor frightened woman and her baby. Someone is going to be very sorry for this.

"Get on my horse," he said. "Don't say a word or make a sound."

"Oh, sir, you must not — "

"Do as I say. I'll attend to this mob."

She turned a fearful gaze on Princess, who gave her a reassuring smile. "We'll all be quite safe," she said. "You can trust my husband. He's a wizard. We're both wizards."

The woman's eyes went wide, but she mounted without a word. No sooner was she seated than Kedrigern covered his eyes and spoke a short

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

phrase, and she disappeared. He walked on at the horse's side, holding the reins. In a short time the mob was clustering around the travelers.

"Have you seen the witch and her brat?" one of their leaders asked.

"We've seen no witch," Kedrigern replied.

"Are you sure?" another said.

"I told you so, didn't I? Who is this witch, and what has she done?"

A third man pushed himself to the fore and demanded, "You've got a horse. Why are you walking?"

"Because I don't feel like riding. Tell me, what has this witch done?"

"It's that devil's child of hers that's done it."

"We'll burn the two of them," someone in the midst of the mob shouted, and voices rose all around in enthusiastic endorsement of his words.

This sort of mob bluster was familiar to Kedrigern. He knew that the longer it was allowed to build the less good was likely to come of it, so he decided to discourage this lot quickly. "I wouldn't go any farther up this road if I were you. There's something worse than a witch lurking back there. We barely escaped it."

As his words spread among the mob, the noise level subsided. One of the leaders plucked up his courage and said, "There's nothing out there but farmland and forest."

Kedrigern shrugged. "Don't say I didn't warn you." He watched as they exchanged uneasy glances, looking to the hilltop, then back to Zendor, then at one another, as if in search of something to buttress the courage they found suddenly draining away. He said, "If your witch meets up with that thing, she'll come to a messy end. But if you want to see for yourselves...."

They wavered. Low, fearful murmuring circulated among them like a cold breeze. They were ready for the finishing touch.

From over the brow of the hill behind Kedrigern's back came a low ominous growl that grew to a snarl and then a roar, as of something large and angry and hungry. A heavy footstep shook the ground, and then another. And another, coming closer.

When the last of the mob was on its speedy way back to the shelter of Zendor's walls, Kedrigern spoke the necessary words. The roars and footfalls stopped. Mother and child came into sight on his mount. The woman's eyes were still wide in awe.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You are a wizard," she said.

"Kedrigern of Silent Thunder Mountain. And this lovely lady is my wife and colleague, Princess. And you're no witch, though that lot seemed to think so. Why were they so angry?"

"It's all the doing of Livia, the bog-fairy."

"A bog-fairy!" Princess said, reaching out to clasp the woman's hand in sympathy. "You poor unhappy creature, why did she do this to you?"

"She wanted my child. When I wouldn't give him up, she placed a terrible spell on him."

Her words electrified Princess. "The fiend! The absolute fiend! Keddie, we must help this woman."

"What, exactly, is the nature of the spell?" Kedrigern asked.

"Oh, it's terrible, Master, terrible."

"Bog-fairy spells generally are. Can you be more specific? Do you remember the words she used?"

Her expression grew grim. "They are burned into my memory, Master. She touched my baby with her wand, then she pointed the wand at me and said in a kind of chant,

'You, who spurn my just demand,
Be a blight throughout the land.
All who hear your infant's cry
Will go raving mad and die,
Or else go blind, or lose their wits,
Or fall into horrific fits
And shake and shriek and moan and twitch
And ache and squeak and groan and itch.
Walls will fall with noise of thunder,
Beams will split and roofs will sunder;
Rack and ruin, pain and rue
Will blight the landscape through and through,
And all the blame will fall on you!'

And then she gave the wand a little flick, just so. And she vanished."

"Typical bog-fairy," said Princess. The spots of color on her cheeks,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the set of her jaw, and the narrowing of her eyes bespoke the upwelling of bitter memories.

Kedrigern asked the woman, "Am I correct in assuming that the spell has already manifested itself, and is the cause of that pursuit?"

"It is so, Master. I've been forced to flee my home. My sister and her husband have a little farm on this very road, and I have come to ask her to help me hide in the forest near her house until I can find some kind soul with the power to help us. I had nearly passed through Zendor without incident when my little one began to cry, and...and.... " She hugged the child to her and began to weep.

"Just tell me what happened."

"At his first faint wail, men and women stopped as if turned to stone. Then they began to cry out in fear and pain. Children fell senseless to the ground. Some thrashed about, and others lay unmoving where they fell. All around us beams groaned, walls shook, glass shattered."

"Has this happened before?"

"It happens every time my baby cries. I strive to avoid all contact with others, but I was hungry, and I risked venturing into Zendor to purchase food. I fled, but a mob pursued."

"Aren't you affected?" Kedrigern asked.

"I hear only the wail of a hungry child."

"Fascinating," said the wizard. "That's an elegant bit of spelling. You don't see many like that these days."

"Don't applaud, do something," Princess said sharply.

"I will, my dear. But for something like this, I'll need the full resources of my library." To the woman, he said, "Will you be safe with your sister for ten days or so?"

She assured them that she would, and gave them directions to the place. From her description, they recognized a farmstead they had passed earlier that day.

"You say they have a farm. What about their livestock?"

"The spell does not affect animals. And I will live deep in the forest behind the house."

"Very well, then. Await us there. We'll bring you to our cottage."

"But Master, there's an awful creature back there. I heard its growl, and its terrible tread."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kedrigern gave her a reassuring smile. "Only a small spell to send the mob scurrying for home. You're perfectly safe. Just wait for us, and then I'll see what I can do about a counterspell."

"That's his specialty," Princess said. "He's very good."

"Master, I'm a poor penniless woman. I can never — "

"Not a problem. This one is on Durmuk the Benign."

THEY REACHED ZENDOR without further incident, and found Durmuk's second cousin, the Chamberlain, waiting at the gates with an honor guard. By that afternoon they were settled in a large, comfortably furnished suite in the palace. A fire blazed in the fireplace, the floor was strewn with fresh rushes, the bedclothes scented with lavender. Servants brought warm water for bathing, and took their traveling garments to be brushed and aired.

"A very gracious reception, don't you agree?" said Princess when the servants and attendants had left them.

"Yes."

"These are lovely chambers."

"Yes."

"Marvelous view of the royal gardens."

A nod.

"And the feast tonight is in our honor."

A grunt.

"You might show a bit more enthusiasm. This is all much better than you anticipated, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I'm suspicious."

"Of what?"

"Everything."

Princess closed her eyes, sighed, and changed the subject. "I hope you can finish your work here quickly. That unfortunate woman and her baby need help."

"She'll have to be patient. I can do nothing until we're home and I have a chance to consult my books."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nothing at all?"

"She's quite safe where she is. The local witch hunters won't set foot on that road for a good long time."

"But that poor child...."

"My dear, the child is under a bog-fairy spell. They're tricky things, as you well know, and this is a very precise one. I would not attempt to break it without thorough research. And even then, I'm not sure — "

A discreet tap at their door interrupted him. At the second tap, he opened it to find the chamberlain and three nobles waiting. With a deep bow, the chamberlain said, "My honored wizards, King Durmuk requests your attendance at an extraordinary meeting of the council."

"And when is this meeting?" Kedrigern asked.

"I am to take you there at once."

Kedrigern and Princess exchanged a quick glance. "Is Zendor under attack?"

"Not yet. An envoy from Grendoorn has come to discuss the worsening situation on the border. No doubt it is a ruse. Grendoorn is a nest of savage criminals."

"And what are we expected to do?"

"His Majesty wishes you to observe the depth of iniquity of our enemies so you may be fully persuaded of our peril."

"I see. I suppose that means dinner will be delayed," said Kedrigern.

The Chamberlain appeared shocked. "His Majesty will not permit his dinner to be ruined by the intrusion of a thieving, lying bully representing a land of sub-human renegades. Dinner will be served as planned."

"Good. I dislike lengthy meetings," said Kedrigern, gesturing for the chamberlain to lead the way. He and Princess followed arm in arm.

They were shown to places at a long table lined with somber-faced officials of Zendor, many in martial uniforms, all of them bearing a family resemblance to the king. Durmuk sat at one end, on a large throne laden with cushions. At the opposite end of the table sat the Grendoornan envoy. He appeared to be an unusually short man; his chin barely reached the tabletop. He exhibited no signs of barbarity, but on the contrary conveyed an impression of civility and courtliness.

Durmuk accorded the wizards a fulsome but brief greeting, omitting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

general introductions. Then, in the most contemptuous manner, he gave the envoy leave to speak.

The envoy rose, revealing himself to be not diminutive but a tall stately figure dressed in subdued gray and black, with a gold chain of office about his neck. He presented a moving appeal for peace and amity between their homelands. Grendoorn had been arming, he admitted, but only for protection: Durmuk's troops had been crossing through Plothy Pass almost daily to raid border settlements (furious denials from the uniformed men) and were massing in great numbers on the Zendoran side of the pass (general outrage; protests and shouted accusations). A large man in a spotless white uniform and crimson cloak sprang to his feet to denounce what he labeled the envoy's shameless lies. The envoy listened with admirable composure and countered by reading a list of destroyed settlements and the casualties and property losses sustained by Grendoorn in each one. His words were interrupted by mocking laughter. The laughter continued throughout his account, accompanied by shouts of "Liar!", "Shut up!" and "Sit down!" Through all these antics he comported himself with great patience and dignity.

Kedrigern looked on with growing distaste as his suspicions were fully validated. This was not a council meeting, it was a methodical humiliation, starting with the seating of the envoy on a low milking stool. It was a deliberate provocation. Durmuk's message was a fraud.

On the other hand, envoys were not impartial and Kedrigern had not yet heard the Zendoran side of the story. All the same.... He glanced at Princess and saw from her frown and the flaring of her nostrils that she shared his distaste at the proceedings.

Before the envoy had finished, the man in the crimson cloak was on his feet again, livid with rage, shaking his fist, "No more! Your lies and distortions insult us!" he cried. "Zendor is aware of your scheme for conquest and will defend itself to the death against your aggression. Begone, traitor, and take your falsehoods with you! Go, before our righteous wrath overcomes our patience."

Kedrigern turned to the man next to him and whispered, "Who is that angry man?"

"Lord Ransidine, First First Cousin to the king and Protector of the Realm," was the reply.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The envoy bowed to Durmuk, and ignoring all the others present, strode from the chamber with head held high. When the door shut behind him, Lord Ransidine, still standing, threw back his head and laughed loudly. "So much for their lying chatter of peace and friendship. Fire and the sword is what that land of traitors deserves, and they shall have it in full measure. Grendoornan blood will flow like a mighty river."

One of the others at the table said, "It won't be easy. Grendoorn has a strong army. They will fight."

"My men will crush them," Ransidine replied.

"Not without many lost lives," another said.

Lord Ransidine brought his fist down on the table. All fell silent. "Enough of this treasonous talk!" he roared. "Grendoorn has too long been a threat to Zendor. We must conquer and subdue it, and return it to its rightful masters. Do you not agree, Your Majesty?"

Durmuk had been gazing out the window. He started, blinked, and nodded with some vigor. "Oh, yes. Conquer and subdue. Yes, I agree. We are in great danger. They're all traitors. Lord Ransidine is right. Must use force on such people."

"I have a plan. Not a drop of Zendoran blood will be shed, I promise you," said Lord Ransidine.

Murmurs of approval rose from most of those present. The two who had questioned exchanged a quick anxious glance.

Kedrigern turned to his neighbor. "The Lord Ransidine is a forceful man."

"A master tactician and brave as a lion. The kind of leader these times require," the man said with obvious satisfaction. When Kedrigern refrained from replying, he went on, "No shilly-shallying, none of your prattle of peace and friendship, just action. That's his way with traitors. Grendoorn will be ours in ten days."

"Why does he call the Grendoornans traitors?"

"Because they are. Always have been, always will be. Nothing to do but destroy them."

"I see," said Kedrigern. "Then it looks as though my journey was a waste of time."

"Waste of time? What do you mean?" said the other, turning on him with a narrow suspicious look.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kedrigern looked about with exaggerated caution and leaning closer, said in a lowered voice, "I can only reveal that your king asked me here to save Zendor from destruction by its enemies. With a man like Lord Ransidine to protect you, I'm not needed."

"Who are you, sir?"

Kedrigern tapped his lips with a forefinger and winked once, slowly and solemnly. That, he thought, would give the fellow something to think about.

Durmuk rose abruptly, and all rose with him. Hurrying to the door, he called back, "We need not sit here all night. The chef is making Ballotine of Duckling á la Chatelaine. My very favorite dish. And he's promised a special surprise for dessert. Let us away. Quickly, quickly."

The dinner that followed was rich in culinary excellence but poor in festive spirit. Durmuk's full attention was given to the food, while the talk among the other diners was of war and preparations for war. Kedrigern listened in fascinated horror as Lord Ransidine described his plans for the future of Grendoorn once the dangerous elements in its population had been annihilated. When the Lord Protector paused to catch his breath and take a sip of wine, Kedrigern asked him what offense the Grendoornans had committed to deserve such an extreme penalty.

With a long disdainful look, Ransidine said, "You are the magician summoned by His Majesty, are you not?"

"Wrong on both counts, my lord."

Lord Ransidine's hand went to his swordhilt as he rose from his place. "Then identify yourself at once!"

"I am a wizard, not a magician, and my presence is requested, not commanded."

Ransidine took a moment to absorb this information. He resumed his seat and then asked, "And this woman?"

"The lady is a princess, a wizard of considerable power, and my wife. You, I am informed, are Lord Ransidine, First First Cousin and Protector of Zendor. And now I would like an answer to my question."

Ransidine fixed a cold gaze on the wizard for a time before saying, "The offenses of the Grendoornans.... I could speak until dawn, wizard, and not begin to exhaust the calendar of their crimes. Suffice it to say that they are rebels, traitors, and renegades. They present a constant danger,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and must be exterminated if Zendor is to enjoy its rightful place among the nations. Your mission, wizard, is to protect the lives of the brave Zendorans who go off to war in defense of the kingdom. You must use your power to see that not one falls."

"I'm always pleased to save brave men from death."

"Then do your duty. You will be well paid," said Ransidine, and turned away, but not before taking a long admiring look at Princess.

I just bet I'll be paid, Kedrigern thought. The aura of knavery hung about Lord Ransidine as unmistakably as his crimson cloak.

WHEN HE MENTIONED his feelings to Princess later that night, her reaction surprised him. "He doesn't seem treacherous. He's a loud nasty bully, yes, but not treacherous," she said.

"He's treacherous. I can tell. And I don't like the way he was leering at you."

"He wasn't leering, just ogling."

"I know leering when I see it. This is a very bad situation, my dear. We were summoned here on the pretext that Zendor was in danger. The fact is that Ransidine and his friends are determined to start a war with Grendoorn. You saw how they tried to provoke the envoy. Durmuk is perfectly willing to let them do it so long as it doesn't interfere with his meals. Ransidine expects me to use my magic to make certain that no Zendoran troops are lost. They want me to arrange a massacre! And for no reason!"

"Don't get excited. There must be a reason," she said. "Maybe the Grendoornans outnumber the Zendorans."

"They don't."

"Then they must have a terrible secret weapon."

"They haven't."

"Perhaps a powerful wizard. Several powerful wizards."

"My dear, we would have sensed the presence of other wizards long before this. No, Lord Ransidine and his friends are hungry for a war, and they want me here to make sure they have it at no cost to Zendor. Not even my fee, I bet."

"You just don't like blustering bullies who enjoy starting wars."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No, I don't. Do you?"

"Of course not. But how can you be certain that's what they're really up to?"

Kedrigern dropped onto the bed beside her, folded his arms, and scowled. "I can't. That's what bothers me. I feel it. I'm sure of it. Everything points to it. But I don't know."

"And what about that poor woman and her child?"

He groaned. "I don't know what to do about her, either. You remember how much trouble we had with the bog-fairy spell on you. It took us years to rid you of that thing."

"This one might not be as bad."

"They're all bad."

"Well, try to get a good night's sleep. I'm sure you'll think of something."

Princess turned on her side and went directly to sleep. Kedrigern would have preferred to vent for an hour or so, but that required an audience. He was sure he would not sleep well, and he was right.

He spent much of the next morning pacing about the palace and the grounds, eyes downcast, trying to concentrate while all around him Zendor made ready for war. Everywhere in the castle and its environs, the clamor of preparation clanked and rattled and thumped and thundered and roared.

He was in a quandary. It would not be right for him to protect the men of Zendor in order that they might butcher their neighbors with impunity; neither would it be right for him to let lives be spilled that he might otherwise have saved. The ideal solution was to stop the war entirely, but with men like Lord Ransidine and his faction determined to reduce Grendoorn to dust and ashes, that might require drastic steps. And on the chance that there were those in Grendoorn who felt as Ransidine did, rash action might only waste time and magic and leave things worse than before. What he needed was a way to make war unthinkable for either side. And if a spell for that purpose existed, it had been kept very secret.

Granted the frailties of human nature and the evidence of history, a permanent peace was unlikely; but if he could find a way to keep matters quiet for a few years, cooler heads might prevail. If they did not seem to be doing so, he could help things along at the proper moment.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He had a strong urge to wash his hands of this sorry business and return home. At the thought, he realized that once home he would have to face the problem of undoing a bog-fairy's spell, and an obviously well-planned one at that, likely to be swathed in all manner of snares for the unwary disenchanter.

His aimless wandering took him through courts and corridors to a dusty passage in the farthest tower, remote from the tumult and the shouting. Here he was surprised by the sudden appearance of a very old man who popped from a doorway to hail him with a joyous cry. "At last! A messenger from my Lord Ransidine! You bear good news, I trust."

The old man's face was the color of buttermilk. The lower half was hidden by an ashen beard that hung almost to his knees. His sunken eyes were bright with what appeared to be genuine delight. Kedrigern had no idea who the old fellow was — probably some mad but harmless royal relation — but he had no aura of magic or menace about him, and seemed so pleased by the sight of another that it seemed a pity to disappoint him.

"Alas, I am no messenger, sir, merely a visitor to Zendor," the wizard said.

The old man's pleasure was undampened. "The more welcome, then. Come in, come in."

Kedrigern followed him into a large chamber lined with shelves on which were heaped in no discernible order books and scrolls and bundles of documents. It was an inviting retreat, recalling the comfortable untidiness of his own workroom.

"Few visit this chamber," the man confided. "You are the second in forty-seven years. Only Lord Ransidine shows any interest in our history."

That was a surprise. "Indeed? He does not impress me as a man given to scholarly pursuits."

"You know the great lord, then?"

"We have dined together, and discussed affairs of state."

"A friend of the Lord Protector is doubly welcome," said the old fellow, clasping Kedrigern's hand in a bony grip. "Lord Ransidine is a true patriot. A man of action. He will reunite the kingdom. I may yet see the dream of generations fulfilled! Zendor made one again! Brothers reconciled! Families rejoined! Be seated, friend, and let us talk."

Kedrigern passed an informative morning with the old man, who was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Historiographer Royal of Zendor, an office he had held for nearly sixty years. He was bursting to talk about his work, and Kedrigern was a willing listener.

The history consisted largely of heroic legend and myth, fleshed out with wishes, guesses, fantasies, and dreams of glory. With the aid of dusty books and ancient maps, he informed the wizard of the Great Severing, when the ancient kingdom of Zendor was divided between the twin sons of the mythical hero King Epizeuxis and his queen, the goddess Anadiplosis. The bold warrior son Blustror retained the ancient name of Zendor for this part of the sundered kingdom, while his sly and treacherous brother Grendoorn took the rich portion beyond the mountains, named it for himself, and proceeded to brew dastardly plots against his noble brother, establishing a pattern of behavior that persisted through succeeding generations. So, at least, went the official history according to Zendor.

"All this was forgotten for many years. But with my loyal assistance Lord Ransidine has unearthed the truth. Now we know the cause of all our troubles." A dramatic pause, and the old man cried, "Grendoorn!"

"Indeed?"

"Beyond all doubt." Rubbing his palms together, twitching with eagerness, the Historiographer went on, "But we know the cure, as well. Lord Ransidine will purge the disloyal elements, reunite the kingdom, and restore Zendor's honor and our glory."

"I see. Have the Grendoornans attacked frequently over the years?"

The old man gave a wild cackle of mocking laughter. "They never attack openly. They do not dare. They pretend to be peace-loving, and speak of our neighborly bond while they weave their stealthy schemes. But Lord Ransidine sees through their façade."

"I bet he does," said Kedrigern.

"When he is king, the world will tremble at the name of Zendor."

"And when will that be?"

"Soon, soon. The stars predict it. At the news of the great victory over Grendoorn, King Durmuk will expire in joy. All Zendor will mourn his tragic loss, but it is destined to be. And the Lord Protector will ascend the throne."

Kedrigern sighed and shook his head. There was the root of the matter, plain as a plum on a white platter. Durmuk was an only child, unmarried.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As First First Cousin, Ransidine need only wait to succeed him. Poor silly Durmuk probably thought his Lord Protector was content to do so, entertaining himself in the interim by playing at war. But Ransidine, it appeared, was not a patient man, even for a sure thing.

The reasons for the war were clear now: pride, vanity, and ambition, the mix generously spiced with hunger for power. A conquering hero, uniter of the ancient kingdom, would simply sweep aside the effete and useless Durmuk. The picture was not pretty, but at least it was no longer a puzzle.

Kedrigern thanked the old man and took his leave. More than ever he needed to think. All very well to have the problem plainly before him, but the solution would be a matter of some delicacy.

His walking brought him to the courtyard, where preparations for the coming onslaught were in full swing. The din was dreadful. Pikemen were stomping and clattering about to the bellowed commands of their sergeants. The heavy tread of their marching thundered in these narrow confines. Drums were beating somewhere, and trumpets blatting loudly and discordantly. Wagons rumbled back and forth to no discernible purpose, menacing all in their path. Large unseen objects crashed and rumbled and thudded amid shouts of rage and frustration.

A rackety business, war, even in its preparatory stages, Kedrigern thought. Here in the courtyard, sounds were magnified to a deafening degree. They echoed back and forth, affording no respite from the din, making it impossible to concentrate. It seemed that the walls would come tumbling down from the sheer volume of sound thundering about within them. Covering his ears, he retreated into the castle.

As he walked down a narrow passage, his ears still ringing, he marveled that men could do battle in such an uproar. He stopped abruptly in his tracks and thought for a moment, then he laughed softly to himself. He clapped his hands together and laughed aloud. He had the solution.

"Remember, now, just enough of a spell to put him into a sound sleep. We don't want him snoring away for the next six months," he said to Princess.

"I know exactly what to do."

"And put a protective spell on yourself as soon as you leave this room.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

No, put it on now. Right now. And extend it over them when you bring them back."

"I think you overestimate the danger."

"Better overestimate than underestimate. Maybe it would be best if you make yourself invisible."

"Oh, really, Keddie."

"I'm very concerned, my dear. I'd like to send an armed escort with you, but I can't trust anyone here. You must take every precaution."

"I will. I promise. Invisibility and a protection spell. Anything else?"

"Speed. Bring them back as quickly as you can. I'll speak with Durmuk and let him know what's to be done."

Princess placed a hand on the doorknob and promptly vanished. Unseen lips brushed his cheek, an unseen voice bade him farewell, and then the door opened and closed.

It took Kedrigern some time to locate the king. Durmuk had felt a sudden urge for scrumbleberry pie, and had gone in person, with a small escort, to his favorite pastry chef in town to order a batch baked at once. Kedrigern found him at the shop, nibbling impatiently at a raisin cookie. Several dozen more cookies lay before him.

"What brings you here, Master Kedrigern? Are wizards fond of scrumbleberry pie?" the king asked.

"I bring good news, Majesty. No one need die. There will be no war."

"How very nice of you!" Durmuk exclaimed with a happy grin. "I don't really want a war at all, but Ransidine and his friends keep insisting that we're in danger, and so...." His expression turned thoughtful. "My cousin will be disappointed. He had his heart set on a brief glorious conquest."

"Perhaps Lord Ransidine will pursue other interests. Say, the study of history."

The king gave a hearty laugh. "You're a droll fellow, Kedrigern. Fancy Ransidine studying history. He's never read a book in his life. Nor have I. Our family were never much for such things."

It seemed the proper time for Durmuk to be made aware of his cousin's new interest in Zendoran history and his plans for the kingdom's future. As Kedrigern was concluding his account to the increasingly astonished and incredulous monarch, Lord Ransidine burst into the shop with a squad of his personal guards at his back.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ignoring the wizard, he said, "You must return to the castle at once, Your Majesty. It is not safe for you to go abroad in such perilous times."

Durmuk lightly waved off the admonition. "No fear, cousin. Master Kedrigern has seen to everything. There'll be no war."

"No war? What do you mean, no war?!" Lord Ransidine cried. His face grew very red.

"He'll explain it to you. I must say, I'm relieved. We can stop this infernal racket, and rushing about, and fuss, and dust, and shouting, while I'm trying to enjoy a decent meal. You can learn to study history."

Ransidine gaped at his cousin in confusion, but only for an instant. Recovering, he drew his sword, roared, "The king is a traitor! Betrayal! Treachery! Seize them!" He brought the sword high for a deadly slash at Durmuk. Kedrigern dove for the king to push him aside, and Ransidine's descending blade caught him a glancing blow on the shoulder. He went down, but even as he scrambled to his feet he was able to work a quick transformation. Lord Ransidine and his men vanished from sight.

"Sorry to be rough, Your Majesty," he said, hauling the astonished Durmuk to his feet while the king's guards poured into the shop and milled about in confusion.

"He tried.... He would have.... Oh, my," said Durmuk in a faint voice. "You.... You're hurt. Here, quick, have a cookie. Sit down. Guard, summon the royal physician. Quickly, quickly! Bring me some pie! Oh, my."

When Durmuk had calmed down, and a table had been spread at which he could revive himself with generous slices of pie, and the wizard's shoulder was being bound with fine linen bandages tied in place by the royal physician under Durmuk's close watch, Kedrigern outlined his peace plan.

"All that's required is a house with a clear view of Plothy Pass for a certain woman and her child. House and outbuildings must be very strongly built. Strong as fortresses. I'll give you the specifications."

"Will this woman defend them all by herself?" Durmuk asked between bites of pie.

"Entirely alone, your Majesty. She is an unfailing peacekeeper."

"Amazing. Astonishing. Do have a piece of pie."

"Thank you. She and her child must live there entirely undisturbed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Necessary supplies are to be deposited at a designated spot, and absolutely no one is to approach the house under any circumstances. No human contact until we notify you. As long as these conditions are met, no aggressor will ever cross the border. I give you my word on that," he said.

"She must be a very powerful wizard."

"She has great power. She's a devoted mother, as well."

Durmuk blinked in wonderment. "How very nice. And she asks no reward?"

"The house, the necessities of life, and privacy. Absolute privacy. Nothing more. But I would suggest a generous stipend as evidence of Your Majesty's good will and magnanimity."

"Yes, of course. A stipend. Amazing. Brilliant. And so simple. Well done, wizard. It's such a relief not to have to go to war."

"Lord Ransidine didn't seem so relieved."

"Oh, him. My cousin is a very brave man, but he's so restless. And always angry. Always shouting at someone. Where is he, by the way? He seems to have disappeared. I suppose I ought to do something about his attack on me."

"I already have. I turned him and his men into mice."

"Mice? Oh, my." Durmuk giggled.

"It's only a temporary spell. He'll come around in three or four months. I hope you don't mind."

"No, no, I don't mind at all." Durmuk paused, a slab of pie halfway to his mouth, and giggled once again. "Mice. It might improve his temper. Perhaps I won't have to hang him after all."

Kedrigern's eyes were on Colette, the baker's cat, snow-white and plump as a dumpling. She had entered silently and composed herself before a small hole in the wainscoting, upon which her gaze was intently fixed.

He smiled. Durmuk had echoed his thoughts. Learning how it feels to be small and helpless and frightened might do wonders for Lord Ransidine's character.

Workmen were dispatched to Plothy Pass that very day. When Princess returned the following morning and saw Kedrigern's bandages, she flew to his side and quite overwhelmed him with solicitude and caresses and anxious questions. He insisted that his injury was minor and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that they had far more important matters to concern them. Once assured, she asked, "What happened to your protective spell? Don't tell me you went out without a protective spell after warning me. Oh, Keddie, how could you be so careless?"

"One hardly thinks a protective spell necessary in a pastry shop, my dear."

"If I recall correctly, you told me that it was better to overestimate the danger than underestimate it. But to ignore it completely...." She threw up her hands.

"Things worked out for the best. I assume your excursion went well. You certainly made excellent time."

She accepted the obvious change of subject graciously. "It was fortunate I had a protective spell on. The baby gave a little whimper, and a tree very nearly fell on me. The previous day he had had a touch of colic. Trees were splintered and boulders shattered for quite a distance around. He's under a sleeping spell now."

"I never realized that I was sending you into peril."

"And I never expected to return and find you wounded," she said, slipping her arms around his waist and laying her head on his uninjured shoulder.

"Fortunately, we're both safe."

"But you must be more cautious in future."

They clung together in silence for a time, and then Kedrigern asked, "Where are our clients, by the way? Are they safe?"

"They're outside the door. Don't worry — they're still invisible."

"I've found a temporary solution. They'll be lonely, but they'll be safe and well provided for while I seek out the proper counterspell."

She looked up at him. "You won't need it."

"Won't I?"

"While I was riding, I had time to think about the curse on that poor child. I don't think you need worry about despelling him."

"I needn't?"

She shook her head. "Livia overlooked something."

She explained her reasoning. It took Kedrigern no more than an instant to see the logic of her solution. He hugged her as best he could with one shoulder swathed in bandages.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Princess went to the door and beckoned the woman and her son inside, where she at once made them visible. "What must I do, Master Kedrigern?" the mother asked. "Are we safe now? How long will they let me stay here?"

"I'm arranging for temporary lodgings on the outskirts of Zendor, well out of earshot of any neighbors. You'll remain there until your house in Plothy Pass is ready. After that it's all in your hands."

"My house? Am I to have a house?"

"A house and grounds of your very own, and all you need to live in it comfortably. Gifts of King Durmuk."

She looked from one to the other in astonishment. "Why is he so generous to me? What must I do?"

"Your duty is very simple You must keep the peace. If anyone enters the pass from either kingdom, you must pinch the baby until he cries. Zendor and Grendoorn depend on you," Kedrigern said.

She hugged the child to her. "Poor little thing. I hope he understands."

"You must not fail. A pinch on that baby's bottom will save hundreds of lives."

"I will be faithful. I'm so grateful to you both. We'll have a little house where we can live out our lives, harming no one. It will be lonely in the years to come, but my little boy will be safe."

"You needn't worry about the future. By the time your boy is walking you can have all the visitors you please. You might even open an inn, or a little shop. Your son will be able to play with other children and make all he noise he wants to without harming anyone," Kedrigern assured her. "By that time, any warlike spirit should have cooled. If not, you need only get word to us."

"But what about the spell?"

Kedrigern nodded to Princess. "My wife will explain."

Princess took the astonished woman by the hand. "Bog-fairy spells are very precise. Livia's wording placed it on the infant. So once your son is no longer an infant — a matter of a year or two — the spell will simply fade away."

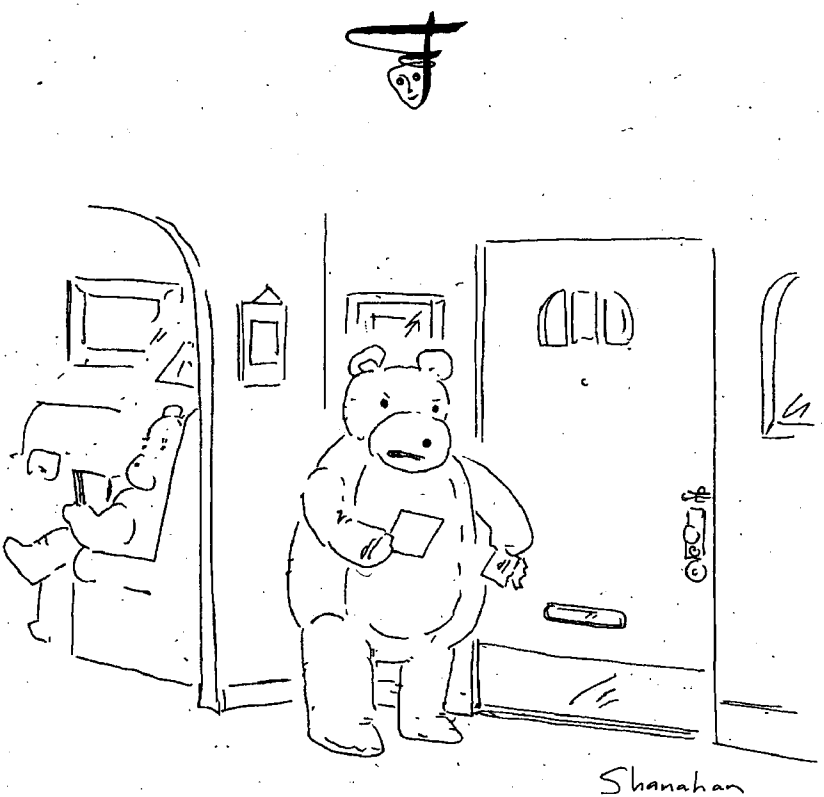
"A year or two...." The woman's face lit up. She shook her head in happy bewilderment. "But how can this be? Livia wanted to cause us both a lifetime of suffering."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Like all bog-fairies, Livia focused her attention on laying springes and traps and pitfalls for anyone who might dare to tamper with her spells. She was mean," Princess said, "and her meanness made her careless. If she had simply said 'child's voice ' instead of 'infant's cry,' the spell would have posed a challenge. But at the time her nasty mind was concerned only with the infant you so bravely denied her."

"It's hard to imagine a bog-fairy being so careless," said the woman.

"Everyone's careless at one time or another," Princess said. She shot a quick glance at Kedrigern. "Even wizards."



"Another goddam tea party."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy&ScienceFiction MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. 96 page Catalog. $5.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

17-time Hugo nominee. The New York Review of Science Fiction. *www.nyrsf.com* Reviews and essays. $4.00 or $36 for 12 issues, checks only. Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570.

Spiffy, jammy, deluxy, bouncy—subscribe to Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet. $20/4 issues. Small Beer Press, 176 Prospect Ave., Northampton, MA 01060.

ENEMY MINE, All books in print. Check: **www.barryblongyear.com**

RAMBLE HOUSE brings back the supernatural novels of Norman Berrow in trade paperback. *www.ramblehouse.com* 318-868-8727

Kelly Link, *Magic for Beginners* (Illus. Shelley Jackson). Maureen F. McHugh, *Mothers & Other Monsters* (Includes five poems). Signed, numbered editions. Small Beer Press, 176 Prospect Ave., Northampton, MA 01060 *www.smallbeerpress.com*

IT'S HIS WORLD . . . you only live in it. From the mind that gave us *Postcards of the Hanging, Virago,* and *La Corneta del Juicio* comes a comic featuring a bent look at both teenage life and the superhero genre. Full-color, released monthly, standard issue 24 pages. *www.freewebs.com/smokingcatcomicsandcollectibles/bdcthumbnailgallery.htm*

WHEN THE OLD man said Billy was in *Underland,* Alyssha thought he meant dead. That was before she went into the strange room under the bridge and came out...elsewhere. *www.underland.montana.com*

WITCHES OF LEONE MANOR: Very erotic novel of the occult $11.95 postpaid. SPIRITUALITY, FINDING INNER PEACE $11.95 postpaid. UFOs: OUT OF THE BLACK coverups and conspiracies $14.95 postpaid. Allegheny Press, Box 220, Elgin, PA 16413 hjohn@tbscc.com

Resurrection of Liberty — Some family secrets can change the galaxy! *www.MichaelLWentz.com*

General reviews of obscure SF classics. *www.flyingturkeys.com/gsg*

BACK ISSUES OF F&SF: Including some collector's items, such as the special Stephen King issue. Limited quantities of many issues going back to 1990 are available. Send for free list: F&SF, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

MISCELLANEOUS

If stress can change the brain, all experience can change the brain. *http://www.undoingstress.com*

Balticon 40 - Maryland Regional Science Fiction Convention. May 26-29, 2006. Neil Gaiman, Gene Wolfe, and more, 300 hours of programming. Info www.balticon.org or PO Box 686, Baltimore MD, 21203.

The ALPHA SF/F/H Workshop for Young Writers (ages 14-19) will be held in Pittsburgh July 19-28, 2006. For info: *http://alpha.spellcaster.org*

FREE GAME CATALOG! CREATIVE ENTERPRISE, PO BOX 297702, COLUMBUS, OH 43229

Dare to Dream. Write your best, creative short story, any theme, 5 pages maximum, for an opportunity to win $500 in cash prizes. **Deadline: July 31.** Mail your story/ $10 entry fee per story payable to: **"Dreamquestone.com", P.O. Box 3141, Chicago, IL 60654.** For electronic submissions visit **www.dreamquestone.com**

The Art of Science Fiction will be on display in the New York Hall of Science from April 1 - May 29, 2006. For more information, please visit *www.nyscience.org.*

Change your future. Earn $50, $75, or even more! Write scientifiction in your spare time. You can learn how to sell to Lovecraft and the other editors. Proven techniques learned from experts. Send $2.00 to Cyril K., P. O. Box 416, Chicago 90, Ill.

F&SF classifieds work because the cost is low: only $2.00 per word (minimum of 10 words). 10% discount for 6 consecutive insertions, 15% for 12. You'll reach 100,000 high-income, highly educated readers each of whom spends hundreds of dollars a year on books, magazines, games, collectibles, audio and video tapes. Send copy and remittance to: F&SF Market Place, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CURIOSITIES

THE QUEST OF THE GOLE, BY JOHN HOLLANDER (1966)

TALL, SLIM, elegant, witty and eminently poetic — by no means, I admit sheepishly, is that a self portrait, but rather a description of a wonderful little book by poet John Hollander. Illustrated by Reginald Pollack and published in 1966 by Atheneum, it's presented as an erudite literary study of an old myth as told by various cultures.

The story in and of itself is simple enough: a king is dying, his kingdom is under a curse, and his three sons must go in search of the Answer, which is made manifest in the Gole. The eldest son is brave and strong, the next is clever, and the youngest is dutiful, as is the custom in these tales.

What sets this apart from other, more traditional quest stories is the way in which it's told. We're given fragments of poetry, some long, some short. Each is presented as part of a longer saga of which the rest has been long lost. Connections are made between seemingly unrelated segments because of shared elements (a poet who reads bird-scratchings in rock, a book that writes the future as you watch), and the story is assembled from those disparate parts into a complete and delightful fairy tale.

The author's commentary is, for me, the most fascinating thing about this little book. Only a poet and teacher (Hollander is the emeritus Sterling Professor of English at Yale) could have done it this well, and I'm glad he did.

—Bud Webster

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BEYOND ARMAGEDDON | SERIES

The Song of the Axe
The Pelbar Cycle, Book 6
BY PAUL O. WILLIAMS
$15.95 paper 978-0-8032-9846-0

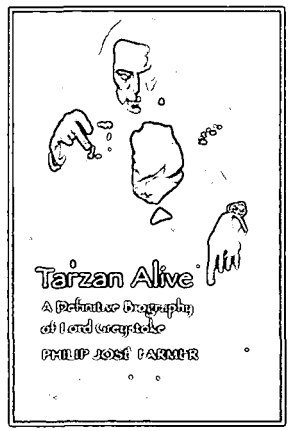
The Sword of Forbearance
The Pelbar Cycle, Book 7
BY PAUL O. WILLIAMS
$15.95 paper 978-0-8032-9847-7

The Last Man
BY MARY SHELLEY
Introduction by Judith Tarr
$16.95 paper 978-0-8032-9350-2

Wolf of the Steppes
The Complete Cossack Adventures, Volume 1
BY HAROLD LAMB
Edited by Howard Andrew Jones
$19.95 paper 978-0-8032-8048-9

Warriors of the Steppes
The Complete Cossack Adventures, Volume 2
BY HAROLD LAMB
Edited by Howard Andrew Jones
$19.95 paper 978-0-8032-8049-6

Tarzan Alive
A Definitive Biography of Lord Greystoke
BY PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER
$19.95 paper 978-0-8032-6921-7
BISON FRONTIERS OF IMAGINATION SERIES



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS

www.nebraskapress.unl.edu
order toll free 1.800.755.1105

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Worlds of Wonder—only $32.97
Subscribe now and save 26%

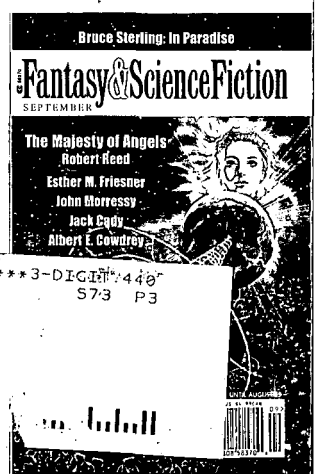
For little more than the price of a hardcover book, we'll tak you into the future with more than 1800 pages of compellin fiction and features: stories by both superstar and rising-sta writers, along with lively and informative departments o Books, Science and Films. Your subscription will include special anniversary double issue, which alone has ove 100,000 words of new short stories and novellas. And if yo subscribe now, you'll pay only $32.97; that's a savings c $11.92, or 26% off the newsstand rate

☐ **Send me one year at the special low rate of $32.97. I save $11.92 off the newsstand price.**

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ ST ___ Zip _____



Outside the US add $10 postage. Make checks payable in US dollars drawn on a US bank. Allow 6 weeks for delivery of first issue. We publish 11 issues a year, including a double Oct/Nov anniversary issue.

☐ Payment enclosed ☐ Bill me
☐ Charge my MasterCard/Visa
☐ New ☐ Renewal

Acct No._____
Exp. date _____

SUBSCRIBE ONLINE AT WWW.FSFMAG.COM

Fantasy & Science Fiction

PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED